PHOENIX

Lady Dorothy Mills

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CHAPTER I

THAT ancient tub, the *Arewa*, bearing her mixed freight of copra and humanity, laboured along the last lap of her five weeks' trip from Sydney to San Francisco. All round lay the southern Pacific, rippleless and burning blue, languidly baring her broad breast to her lover, the sun. The small knots of white humanity that dotted the *Arewa's* narrow deck seemed like clusters of turbulent insects, whose tiny droning and buzzing scarcely broke the vast, oppressive silence.

Out on the fo'c'sle, under the lee of a high block of machinery, Mrs. Fersen lay in her battered deck-chair, hands crossed behind her head, staring at the sky-line ; the blank abstraction of her eyes, and the immobility of her pose, seemed part of the vast inertia of the horizon all round her, as fathomless and brooding as the ocean itself.

Presently her expression lost its blankness, and in her eyes sprang up a faint suggestion of annoyance. On the other side of her bulwark of machinery there was the scuffling sound of feet, and of two breathless young voices. It would appear that someone was chasing somebody else.

" You little devil ! " exclaimed a boy's voice.

" Jack, you pig ! " a girl's voice answered him.

" Pig ! Just you wait ! "

The scuffling noise increased, and on Mrs. Fersen's ears fell the sound of a hearty, resounding kiss. It was answered by a protesting squeal and a half-defiant, half-triumphant, boyish laugh, and the pattering sound of feet receded aft.

Mrs. Fersen stirred restlessly in her chair and frowned.

" Damn youth ! " she said, half aloud. " Youth ! How I hate it ! "

Analyst of her own emotions as she usually was, she did not for once realise the unusualness of her remark, or, rather, of the sentiment that had prompted it. She had nothing against the boy and girl whose kiss had disturbed her dreams, or against boys and girls in general. Indeed she was sympathetic to young things and popular with them, and of this particular couple she had watched the budding loves with a kindly tolerance throughout the *Arewa's* leisurely dalliance among the Coral Islands, and more than once had shielded the girl, Averil, from the inquiring zeal of an over-anxious chaperon.

The look of weariness deepened on her face as she leant back and stared up at the blue tent of the sky. The cruelly brilliant light of a tropical afternoon showed up the weariness that seemed to have permanently set its stamp on her whole face and person, to have bitten deep into her soul itself, and the havoc that

time and not weariness alone had wreaked on her. It pointed merciless fingers at the straggling, rusty grey of hair that must once have been chestnut, the disfiguring lines cut deep in the colourless skin, the tired eyes and mouth, the flaccid flesh and muscles of the face and round-shouldered figure. With another restless movement Mrs. Fersen looked down, and her eyes rested on her dowdy dress and shoes, chosen hurriedly and without care; then they wandered to a superb diamond ring on the little finger of her left hand. She made an abrupt gesture, as if to snatch off the ring, then paused. She smiled crookedly and as if unwillingly.

"Last year the income on that would have kept me for five months," she reflected. "And yet I wish it were at the bottom of the sea."

Her frown deepened. "What is the use of it? And yet I used to long for jewellery, and soft furs, and lovely clothes, and all the flesh-pots, and now it's too late. What's the use of that ring, or of five thousand pounds a year, or of being alive even? I am old and ugly; I am sixty-five. What's the use of anything? I almost wish Hendriks had not struck that gold. Sixty-five. . . ."

She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she did not hear the approach of feet behind her—older feet this time, that moved with a quiet, deliberate self-confidence. From the deck amidships drifted down the noisy laughter of Averil and Jack as they romped through some absurd game. Again she was conscious of a twinge of jealous irritability.

" Damn youth ! " she said again, this time aloud.

" Do I intrude ? " asked a man's deep-throated voice, with a faint suggestion of a foreign accent, as its owner seated himself on a heap of cordage beside her.

" Oh, it's you, Professor Antonius. No, delighted," she said. But there was no welcome in her voice.

" You are kind, but not very truthful, I am afraid ! " smiled Henry Antonius, as he looked up at her with the air of sympathetic cordiality that he turned on all women alike, of whatever age or degree of attractiveness. Mrs. Fersen's face relaxed into a slight smile. In company with the rest of the ship, especially the women, she liked Antonius. He was good company in the smoke-room, showed no desire to monopolise the society of the prettier women, and was reported to be very clever. He had even succeeded in living down the evident " foreignness " of his origin, that is generally so prejudicial to a man in British company. It was known that in Sydney he had been a woman's doctor with a brilliant practice, which he had given up for laboratory work, highly specialised study of some kind, that he was now on his way to New York to demonstrate. In appearance he was big and rather darkly handsome, with the broad, low forehead of the scientist, frank eyes, and a reserved mouth, and he was aged about fifty.

" Let us be candid and admit that you were not in the least glad to see me," he said, still smiling. " You did not want to see anyone. You wanted to be

alone with your thoughts, though, from what I heard of them, they cannot have been been very pleasant ones."

Mrs. Fersen smiled outright, showing two rows of superb white teeth.

"Yes, I'm afraid I was talking aloud. A senile habit, surely forgivable at my age! But what was I saying?"

"I only caught the fine old classic English word of 'damn'! It was said with emphasis, but what or whom you were damning I don't know."

Again a burst of youthful laughter floated down the still air from amidships. Mrs. Fersen hesitated, then jerked her head backwards.

"That!"

He raised his eyebrows in inquiry, then nodded understandingly. "That—yes. It is a little blatant, but one grows used to it."

Her eyes narrowed almost fiercely as she looked at him.

"You! Yes. But I?"

"Why not you as well as I?"

"You, you are young."

"I, dear lady? I, young?" He patted the white streaks that showed among the smooth black hair above his ears.

"Comparatively; and you are a man. A man, and fifty at the outside; I a woman, and sixty-five."

He did not commit the mistake of a compliment.

"Is that so bad?"

" Just lately it has dawned on me that it is very bad indeed."

" Why only lately? "

" Because since only quite lately—since two months, to be exact—have I had time to even realise that I was sixty-five, to realise that I was still alive, in fact; or, rather, to realise that I had never really been alive as a woman counts life. Before that I was merely a machine that worked to prolong existence. Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty—those ages passed unnoticed. They did not matter or count as things were then. In spite of everything, I have kept my health and strength astonishingly, and am as strong as a horse. . . . It is a bit of a shock, you know, suddenly to come alive and realise that you are an old woman."

She had been speaking with concentrated intensity, in quick, staccato phrases. She glanced down at the man beside her, who was looking up into her face with an intentness that half surprised her. Though not unpopular with the rest of the passengers, she was not accustomed to, nor did she expect to arouse, any very keen interest among the masculine half. She smiled almost shamefacedly.

" I suppose I seem to you a silly, discontented old woman, just like scores of others you must have met in your profession."

" No, you do not. You—interest me. Won't you go on? "

" How? "

" Won't you tell me how it is that the tragedy of

age has come to you so suddenly, and, in particular, why?" His eyes were keenly studying her face, but his voice was warm and sympathetic.

"Well, I suppose, in company with the rest of the ship, you know that two months ago I found myself possessor of quite a big sum of money from the gold that Hendriks struck at Loma. It looks like increasing, too. It all happened in a night, so to speak, as things do in fairy-stories. For the first time in my life I fainted when I heard of it. Remember that for forty-five years I had never known what it was to have a comfortable bed, a well-served meal, a frock that I had not made myself and contrived with infinite sacrifice, that I had never been to a theatre, or worked for less than fourteen hours a day, or had ten shillings of my own in the world. For forty of those years I had ceased to be a woman, or to think or feel as a woman feels. I was a drudge, a machine to do dull, sordid work, way up in the Australian bush, not seeing half a dozen white faces in the year. Suddenly I find myself with a hundred thousand pounds in the bank, and more coming in. Can you imagine it? A hundred thousand pounds, as useless as the roc's egg."

"Why useless?"

"What can they buy me? Two months have accustomed me to mere creature comforts. What else is left to me at sixty-five? I have no home, husband, children, or any other human ties or affections. I am too old and unattractive for social gaieties such as many women live for. Now I am travelling, but one

cannot live on 'sights,' and soon my old bones will grow weary of dragging themselves about. Forty years ago, when I was not too tired, I dreamt of life, and love, and laughter, and also of ambition and power. Now, when I am free to take them, they have passed me by. I am too old."

"But you have brains. Brains do not pass by with the other things."

"No, they can stay to torture one! What use are they to me now? It is too late to cultivate them, to make use of them. What work or hobby can I take up at my age? There remains charity, philanthropy. I shall come to that, of course. Most of the time I am resigned, but just at present I am wallowing in a pent-up sea of selfishness that for forty-five years has had no outlet! For the moment all the inhibitions of forty-five years are punishing me. Damn them!"

"I understand."

"I wonder if you do? You are probably thinking me a silly old woman with young ideas, who won't grow old gracefully! It's not that really. There is a great deal to be said for age; it can be just as beautiful a thing as youth. Like youth, it is just what you make it. With me it is like being a flower that has withered before it ever blossomed—a sterile, rotten thing. I have reached old age without having known youth. People with normal lives grow old gradually; they have a vast accumulation of memories, experiences, ties, obligations, and affections to make life complete. I am restarting life with a blank sheet, when it is too

late to write anything on it worth while. It is like picking up a glass and finding it empty. It is not being old that I mind, but that I have never been young. I wouldn't mind being dead so long as I had once been alive."

Her face twisted in a smile that held tears. Antonius rested his hand on her arm sympathetically, and there was a long pause.

"Forty-five years ago," said Mrs. Fersen slowly, "I had one year of life—real, wonderful life. I have been thinking of it to-day." Her voice trailed away on a breathless note.

The heavy silence was broken by the loud clanging of a bell. Mrs. Fersen twitched back her head and shoulders and rose briskly to her feet.

"Lunch!" she said in her normal voice, and smiled as if defiantly. "Anyway, introspection has not spoilt my appetite. I am famishing." She hesitated awkwardly. "I hope I haven't bored you with my maunderings?"

Without waiting for an answer, she hurried across the deck and down the companion-way. She suddenly felt rather ashamed of her confidential outpourings. It was so many years since she had had a fellow-human to confide in that self-expression seemed to her almost nakedness.

That evening, as the *Arewa* lay moored to the battered wharf of a tiny coral island, there was a fancy dress dance, and Joanna Fersen, with a good nature that had in it something almost propitiatory, had

spent a busy afternoon helping the younger women with their costumes and make-up. She herself did not dress up, but spent the evening in her deck-chair, pulled up to the edge of the dancing-floor, talking at intervals to the captain, and the doctor, and one or two of the older men, who liked her for letting them talk about themselves and for her occasional flashes of shrewd humour. At eleven o'clock, when the prizes had been adjudged, and the band, Cinderella-wise, had turned back into a couple of stewards with a pronounced thirst, the deck slowly emptied. Mrs. Fersen, gathering her belongings, went below, but the stuffy heat of her cabin was unbearable, and she returned to the deck, where a faint breeze blew off the sea, making a gentle rustling among the palms that grew almost to the water's edge, and stirring a faint, aromatic scent from the sleeping tropical flowers.

For a long time she leant against the rail, listening to the multitude of tiny sounds that fill the nights of the tropics, where life never quite sleeps. Near by, the scarlet blossom of a flamboyant tree made a mosaic against the dense indigo blue of the sky; behind her, a little breeze broke the ripples of blue-black water into tiny cascades of phosphorus that the Polynesian children believe to be the hair of sea-ghosts; from the stunted palm-trees came the soft, sleepy chuckle of little green parrots. Occasionally couples passed her, slipping ghost-like down the gang-plank—boy and girl for the most part, arm in arm, absorbed. Sometimes from the dark seclusion of the bushes ahead came

the sound of low laughter, and in the distance she recognised the happy giggle of Averil; and once, as the fitful moon for a moment lit up a dark patch of shadow under a hibiscus-tree, she caught sight of a couple locked in a close embrace. The woman's head was tilted back to meet an endless kiss, and the pose of her body in the diaphanous dress of a bacchante expressed an oblivious abandon. It was Mrs. Kearney, the ship's "vamp," and her partner was a hen-pecked married man of hitherto accredited virtue. Mrs. Fersen checked a quick gesture of prudish disgust. Mrs. Kearney, her past, present, and future, had been the chief subject of gossip ever since the *Arewa* had left Sydney, and her low, provocative laughter and sibilant whispering had filled the dark corners of the ship every evening long after honest folk were in bed. For no reason that she could name, the beauty of the night had been spoilt for Joanna Fersen. The evening breeze blew with a faint sense of chill on her bare neck and arms, and suddenly she felt extremely alone.

She glanced down the long, narrow deck. It was empty, for the older passengers, with a wise dislike of night air and a comfortable desire for slumber, had long since gone below. Only from the smoke-room forward drifted snatches of bass laughter from a few late birds lingering over a last drink. From the bushes on shore still came faint murmuring and wisps of laughter, though darkness again hung over the hibiscus-tree. To the ears of Joanna Fersen the tropical night seemed full of voices, full of significance,

seemed pregnant with subdued yet violent life. All nature, whether human or of the air or the earth or the sky, seemed to be in close communion ; only she was alone. From far away in the forest came the muffled drumming of a tom-tom that sounded like the beating of a savage heart. The sense of loneliness weighed upon her unbearably. She twitched her shoulders impatiently as it struck eight bells.

" Don't know what's the matter with me these days," she muttered to herself. " It must be liver, and it'll be rheumatism in the morning if I don't go to bed like all the other old fogeys."

As she turned to go, drawing her shawl more closely round her, the voice of Henry Antonius greeted her in the darkness, cheerful and mellow as the voice of a man who has smoked an excellent cigar and enjoyed three glasses of port with no fear of the morrow.

" Hallo, Mrs. Fersen. Not gone to bed yet? I thought I was last up except for those incorrigible philanderers out there." He waved the stump of his cigar towards the darkness of the island.

" I started an hour ago, but my cabin was so stuffy I couldn't breathe."

" They always are when we're tied up. I expect mine is as bad. Pity it's too damp to sleep out. Are you sleepy? "

" Not particularly."

" Nor am I. Never felt less like bed in my life, and there is all to-morrow to sleep in. What about sitting on the other side of the deck for a bit, till we

feel sleepy? There is a nice breath of air coming in off the sea. I think I can wangle another drink off the barman. What will you have?"

"A lime squash, please."

"Right. I'll be back in a minute."

Five minutes later they were installed in chairs on the port side, two long glasses beside them.

"Comfortable? Happy?" inquired Antonius solicitously, as he leant forward to tuck a rug round her feet.

"Both," said Joanna Fersen. She smiled her quick, crooked smile that seemed oddly young on her worn face. "What would all the other old fogeys say?"

"Why?"

"Well, this seems rather incongruous, doesn't it? By rights you should be squiring some fair young thing instead of me—Mrs. Kearney, or Molly Kershaw, or half a dozen other of the pretty women among our crowd."

"Pretty women." He shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"Why not? Don't you care for them? They like you, and I should have said that you were eminently human."

"Well—like all men, I suppose, and especially men of a southern race, pretty women please my eye, but in nine cases out of ten that is about all. Also, most of my life I have struggled too hard and worked too hard to have had time and opportunity to make a cult of the lust of the eye."

"Struggle? That is not a word one associates with you, somehow. You seem too confident, too successful, too—complete."

"Cause and effect. Because I have struggled I am, I think I may say, fairly successful, and I hope to become more so. For twenty-five years I struggled. My mother was an English nursery-governess, a doctor's daughter, who died soon after I was born; my father a Syrian petty merchant. Through all the miserable, half-starved years of my adolescence, when I studied medicine in a small German University, and earned the price of my food and clothing by doing odd jobs for the richer students, ambition was my mistress and my goddess. Later, I evolved a theory that I have spent the last few years working on, and which will soon, I hope, be given in practical form to the world. And, as a means to an end, when success in ordinary medical work had come to me, I set up as a woman's doctor. Luckily I was—lucky."

"Or clever?"

"Clever in a way, if you like, but psychologically more than scientifically, perhaps, for psychology plays a greater part in women's doctoring than physiology." He shook his head at the sceptical lift of her eyebrows. "That is not a gibe, as I could explain to you if we had more leisure."

"And your theory? You have completed it? It is successful?"

"I have completed it, yes. For the rest, between theory and success comes experiment."

"May one know what it is?"

"Not yet. Later on I hope the whole world will know."

She looked him over appraisingly.

"What it is to be a man! Look at you and look at me! Even allowing for the fifteen years' difference in our ages, struggle has made you; it has finished me."

"I think you do yourself an injustice."

"No, I don't, though in fairness be it said that, whereas your struggle was a noble one, glorified and fed by ambition, mine was an ignoble and sordid one, without end or meaning."

"Does it hurt you to talk about it?"

"No, it has not even the dignity of sorrow! It is as commonplace as life itself. My father, an Irishman called Phillips, a gentleman and a ne'er-do-well, after a disastrous year that comprised everything from the death of my mother to bankruptcy, left our home in the west of Ireland when I was sixteen, and eventually we settled down in Sydney. Three years later he died there, and simultaneously I lost the secretary job which had mainly supported the two of us. Through another girl at the office I met the big theatrical manager of the moment. I was a pretty girl then—beautiful, I believe—and could sing a bit, and had a natural gift for dancing. He was interested in me, and took trouble over me, and eventually, to cut a long and quite respectable story short, he gave me my chance in a musical comedy show. To this day the why of it remains a mystery to me, but I caught on—

wildly. I became the rage. Sydney was a gay place in those days, just after the Kalgurli boom. I made a lot of money, and spent it. I lived like a princess, and had a deliriously wonderful time, and the men were after me like flies. But through it all I kept what is called straight. Then I fell in love, or thought I did. At any rate, it was like a typhoon. He was good-looking in a way that I have learnt since is a danger signal, and he had a voice and manner to coax an angel out of heaven. At any rate, he had the decency to marry me, and I went off with him up country—way up north. You remember those years after the Kalgurli boom? Everyone was gold crazy—they seemed to think the world was made of gold—and the rumours and the fever and the awful dishonesty and the tragedies! We pushed farther and farther north after the golden will-o'-the-wisp till we broke our hearts in the Oxhill country. We were stranded there, and my husband got a job on Petersen's Station which just saved us from starvation. But he went to pieces, my husband did, all to pieces; and he drank, and ill-treated me. When my baby girl was born I was very ill, and nearly died, and most of my health and all my looks went. Those years were hell, and only the kiddie made them endurable at all. Then some English prospector—a tenderfoot—came through, and when he went my husband went with him—in the night, like a thief—and took my baby with him. She was five then, and since then I have never known what became of her. I hope she is dead, for fear of what may

have befallen her. His death certificate was eventually traced and given to me." Mrs. Fersen's voice trailed away.

"And then?"

"Then I was ill again, and when I got better I looked like an old woman, though I was only twenty-seven. Petersen, out of pity, kept me on as household drudge. He was not a bad man at heart, I suppose, but rough and brutal when drink took him, which was most of the time. I had six hours' rest a night, and just enough food to keep me alive, and often envied the donkey that worked in the yard. I had neither the money nor the initiative to go away. That lasted over thirty-five years. Just that, and nothing else. The thirties and forties and fifties passed by without my noticing them. Thirty-five years is a long time—more than enough time to kill a human soul! At last, two years ago, Petersen died, and of all things surprising—touching, it seemed to me—left me a hundred pounds. Hendriks the Dane was staying at the station at the time, and induced me to buy some shares in the new stake he had pegged out at Loma. You know the rest. They found gold—mountains of it—at Loma. And my hundred pounds turned into a hundred thousand, and more coming, for, after realising, I bought more shares. That was two months ago. And —well, here I am."

Antonius stared out to sea.

"What a tragedy!" he murmured. He leant over, and laid his strong, supple hand on hers. "You don't

want my sympathy, I know, but may I offer my admiration?" He paused again. "And now?"

"That is what I ask myself. That is what I asked the universe—or you—this morning."

"I understand—now."

They were both so absorbed in their own thoughts that they started slightly as a couple with arms entwined passed by. A little familiar giggle reached their ears as Averil tiptoed down the companion. The sound brought them back to earth.

"How simple the problems of youth!" commented Joanna Fersen. "They all end in a kiss." But this time her remark was without bitterness, and she smiled sympathetically.

Antonius was scrutinising her tired face by the light of the electric bulb that hung above them.

"What wonderful teeth you have," he said involuntarily. He paused. "You must once have been a very beautiful woman."

"I believe I was; but perhaps you remember. I was billed as Jeanne Phillipe."

"Jeanne Phillipe! Good God, do I remember! I was a small guttersnipe in Aleppo at the time, but years later I remember a man telling me that he had waited for two hours in the rain at Sydney to see you go in at the stage door, and that he had gone without his supper of bread and cheese for a seat in the gallery to watch you dance for ten minutes."

"Yes, that was my golden year, the year that sometimes—this morning, for example—I think of."

She smiled wistfully, and Antonius took both her hands as she rose from her chair.

"Mrs. Fersen," he said, "there are occasions such as this in which there is nothing one can say of what is in one's heart. May I thank you for giving me your confidence, and may I ask you to consider me your friend, if ever you want one?"

"Not my friend merely," said Joanna Fersen simply. "My first friend."

"Thank you. And the privilege of friends is to do things, not merely to say them. I wonder. . . . Perhaps one could help." His tone for the moment was abstracted, as if he were weighing many things in his mind. "I wonder. . . ."

They had moved to the top of the companion, and Mrs. Fersen turned, holding out her hand.

"Thank you," she said. "And good night."

"Good night, dear friend."

Antonius watched her till she had disappeared from sight, and for almost an hour he tramped the deck, chewing hard on his cigar, as if in deep thought.

CHAPTER II

MRS. FERSEN came in for a good deal of good-natured ragging at lunch next day from the little coterie at the doctor's table on the subject of her midnight *tête-à-tête*. Belated couples flitting bedwards had passed the story on as a good joke.

"You can't pretend, Mrs. Fersen," boomed the doctor, "that it was not the stars and their etceteras that you were talking about, for my professional eye, though less expert perhaps than Antonius's, tells me that it couldn't have been a medical consultation."

"You will be getting your eyes scratched out by all our she-cats," giggled Averil in her ear. "They have been stalking him patiently ever since Sydney, and Flora Kearney had marked him as very specially her own, after she had finished her meal off MacAlister."

The joke being considered frankly in the light of a farce by its perpetrators, as are such jokes when levelled at a woman past the age when they may have a possible foundation on fact, dragged itself to a boring length, till, from the lack of any fresh sustenance, it died a natural death.

For Antonius showed no signs of wishing to resume the friendly intimacy of the preceding evening, nor on the following two days did he seek the society of Joanna Fersen, or address her beyond a courteous

greeting in passing. Mrs. Fersen felt little surprise and no disappointment. She was not used to such small and formal attentions to which even women of her age of a wider world are accustomed. She reflected placidly that possibly he regretted his temporary expansiveness born of a mellow mood and an idle hour. Possibly even his friendliness had been merely a trait of his professional instinct, that unconsciously analyses and probes.

The last few days of the *Arewa's* passage passed as invariably pass such days. The little loves and hates, the little feuds and scandals, drew each to their little climax. The night before they reached San Francisco, Averil confided to Mrs. Fersen that she was engaged to marry Jack, and what did it matter that they had no money since they had each other, and whatever would mamma say? The usual poker scandal had been shown up in the smoke-room. Mrs. Kearney's depredations on the hen-pecked MacAlister had been brought to book by Mrs. MacAlister, who had dealt her public and well-deserved castigation in the middle of an evening concert. Every corner of the ship was sibilant with vows of eternal affection and friendship; there was infinite exchange of addresses and scribbling of dates in note-books.

In the midst of it all, Mrs. Fersen felt more than ever alone. Every one of the passengers except herself—even the oldest and dullest of them had definite plans; had friends to meet, old ties to renew, business interests to pursue. Even in the midst of

the most regretful adieux—each person was mentally girding up his or her loins anew in anticipation of the busy, possibly pleasurable life that lay ahead. Only Joanna Fersen had no plans, nothing definite ahead to look forward to.

" Oh, I am just going to look round to begin with," was her answer to innumerable queries. She had booked rooms by cable in San Francisco, after which she supposed she would drift round the States for a while, then eventually to England, and to Ireland, the land of her birth. She felt a trifle overwhelmed at the prospect of the great, bustling continent that lay before her, a little tired in anticipation. She was conscious of no thrill. She wished there were someone to arrange things, to make plans and obligations for her.

The night before their arrival she had the decks almost to herself. Below, in the corridors and cabins, there was a turmoil of trunks, and littered belongings, and assiduous stewards. In the middle of a row of empty chairs she sat alone, huddled in a fur cloak, gazing forlornly over a vast expanse of turbulent grey February sea. She started slightly as Henry Antonius appeared suddenly round the corner, smoking the inevitable cigar, and dropped into the chair beside her.

" May I talk to you ? " he asked.

" Of course."

He leant forward, silently chewing at his cigar, as if thinking deeply. Presently he leant back, and threw the butt into the sea with a decisive gesture.

"Yes," he said at last. "It has taken me three days to make up my mind, and now—well, I have been thinking much over what you have told me the other day, about yourself. You remember?" She nodded.

"I have a suggestion to put to you—a suggestion merely, which it is up to you to accept or reject; only I beg that you will give it a little consideration first. As a friend—and I hope that you will believe that I am sincerely one—I shall make no effort to bias your decision. My explanation is rather long and complicated, and deals for the moment entirely with my scientific or professional side, so I will ask you to hear me out before we touch on the personal aspect."

"Yes?"

"Because of this primary scientific aspect, will you permit me to ask you a few medical questions? And will you trust me, and believe that they are asked in no inquisitive and impertinent spirit, but that they are necessary to forward my suggestion?"

"Of course."

"And that, whatever view you may take of it, you will believe at any rate in the honesty of my ideals?"

"Of course."

"And, above all, that, whatever decision you may eventually make, our conversation or anything relating to it you keep in the strictest confidence?"

"I promise. Go on. You intrigue me." In quick succession he asked her a dozen or so purely medical questions, which she answered in the same impersonal

tone in which he had asked them. His genial, man-of-the-world air had disappeared, and he was now completely the keen man of medicine. From time to time he nodded his head, as if satisfied.

" Good ! " he exclaimed at last, and was silent for a few moments. " And now to my story.

" You remember I told you," he continued, after a pause, " that several years ago I gave up my practice for laboratory work, to work out an experiment on a theory of my own connected with a certain problem that I will try and explain as briefly and with as little technical detail as possible, so as not to confuse you. Later, if you like, I can go into it with you from the scientific side. You see, I trust your word and your discretion implicitly."

" I guarantee that you can."

" Thank you. Well, this problem is not a new one ; indeed, it is as old as the first medicine-man ! My personal theory as to its possible solution came to me nearly thirty years ago, while I was studying under a certain little-known but extremely wise old professor in a small German University where I started my medical education. The germ of the theory came from him. He was an old man, and, dying, he bequeathed me the results of his researches. To cut a long story as short as possible, I pursued and worked on this theory for many years. Eventually finance and opportunity and my increased knowledge permitted me to devote myself exclusively to it, and I am confident that I have now achieved my aim.

You have heard, no doubt, of all sorts of schemes, fantastic, improbable, or almost probable, for the prolongation of life—or, rather, the renewal of youth? Such a one as 'monkey gland' you have, of course, heard of. All these, I must point out, touch only on the fringe of the thing. The treatments are immature in their conception and uncertain in their results, for the whole of this side-line of science is immature and imperfect. The alchemists of old dreamed of bigger things. I have followed in their footsteps. My smaller experiments have been entirely successful. Now I can confidently say that I have formulated, not an elixir of life, but a treatment by which I can restore any healthy human or animal organism, of whatever age, unless already subject to organic disease or attacked by senile decay, to its full vigour of maturity."

"How amazing! And what is the treatment?"

"The details I don't feel I can conscientiously tell you, nor would the non-medical mind understand them. Roughly—well, you have probably learnt in your childhood that there is in our bodies, apart from physical matter, an essence, more intangible than a fluid, which is life itself. To the best of my belief I have discovered the composition—the ingredients, so to speak—of that essence, with which, by a worked-out combination of means, mainly by injection, I can recharge the human body. The complicated part of it is that the combination or mixture varies in each organism according to age, nerves, blood-pressure, and

a host of other things, so that each subject for treatment has to be studied with the most meticulous care. For a variety of reasons the female organism is the easiest to work upon."

"You say that your experiments have been successful?"

"For the last two years, invariably. But they have been minor ones. It yet remains to make the extreme experiment—to prove it to my own complete satisfaction, and in the course of time to set before the world, if needs be, an old man or woman who is really and indeed young."

"Well?" Mrs. Fersen's question rang out like a blow, and her weary, tawny eyes seemed as if they were dissecting his inmost soul.

"I have come to you!" His eyes in their turn probed her.

"Go on!"

"For some months now I have been searching for a subject for the perfect experiment. So far I have found none that wholly satisfied me, apart from the fact that there are few people who might care or feel justified to risk such an apparently fantastic experiment. In you I find a perfect subject; of what must have been an almost perfect maturity of mind and body, and still entirely free from the physical infirmities and organic troubles usually prevalent in man or woman of your number of years. Also—and, remember, I am speaking now purely professionally—you have told me something of your life and circumstances.

And it occurred to me that, being, as you are, without ties or obligations or the normal hindrances of mankind, you might, when I had demonstrated and proved my pretensions to your satisfaction, be prepared to make the experiment. Think it over. There is no need to hurry."

Mrs. Fersen's eyes were looking out to sea under wrinkled brows, as if she were thinking hard. When she spoke, her voice was impersonal and businesslike.

"As you tacitly admit, there is a great deal to be considered. Before we go further, may I ask you a few practical questions as they affect me?"

"Of course."

"When you talk of restoring youth to the human being—me or anyone else—what age do you mean, and what are the probable after processes?"

"Restoration to the exact point where the subject achieved perfect maturity—that is to say, at about thirty. The subject then regains his or her highest shade of development in appearance, and in mental and bodily vigour. After that they pursue the usual course of life through middle age to age quite normally. Whether, when old age is reached for the second time, the treatment can be repeated with the same results it is too early yet to say. I am inclined to think not yet, though it may come later, when I have progressed yet another step in the science."

"And the mind and character—is their youth restored too, or do they remain old?"

"They are restored to precisely the same degree.

Memory remains, of course, and experience which may slightly modify the viewpoint of the subject. But mind and character, and even viewpoint, are based more on the physical aspects and on the emotions than most people imagine, so the inevitable modification will be very slight indeed, and, on the whole, advantageous."

"The emotions—they too rejuvenate?"

"Precisely the same."

"Briefly, you claim to restore a person to the highest development they had attained in their past, in mind, soul, and body, and that in every way absolutely they will continue normal through the natural course of their life—that they are, in fact, as if they had not been old?"

"Precisely that. The subject can work, play, live, love, bear children, in the natural course of nature. My treatment in no way produces an abnormality; it simply, by recharging the depleted life essence, makes the person what he or she should be. Haven't you ever, in the old books and chronicles, remarked on the—to us—phenomenal ages to which our remote ancestors lived? They were normal in the length of their lives. We, through wrong living, abnormal heredity, evolution, who knows what, are abnormal in the shortness of ours. To put it colloquially, I, by discovering how to compound the natural force, am merely supplementing the weakness or laziness of nature."

"I see. And your experiment, is it dangerous? There is risk in it to mind or body, or death?"

" I must admit that there is. And it was because of the possible risk that I have hesitated in making my suggestion to you ; that I have debated with myself whether I had the right to incur it, even if you were willing."

" The risk would be my concern. As you have said, I have no ties, or obligations to others. I have no one but myself to consider. I have a right to take the risk if I choose. Of what form is it ? Of ill-health or disfigurement, or death ? "

" Not of ill-health or disfigurement, but possibly, though remotely, of death, or perhaps madness. I conscientiously believe that every detail of my treatment is so perfected that failure is impossible. I believe I have thought of every eventuality and guarded against it. But, as I said, I have not had the opportunity to make the supreme experiment, therefore I can give no guarantees. A miscalculation of the preliminary, very powerful serum that is the medium of what I have called the essence, might affect the brain. The treatment includes some very delicate surgery ; here miscalculation might mean death. One experiment such as I propose will prove once and for all the accuracy and completeness—or otherwise—of my discovery."

" What do you humanly consider are the chances of failure ? "

" Considering all things, I should say the chances of failure are about three in ten."

" Three in ten chances of madness or death. About

three and a quarter on ! And is the treatment painful ? And is it long ? "

" Extremely painful. I cannot conceal it from you. The mingling of certain elements set up for a time a condition that induces an acute, almost agonising pain, followed by a period of coma—a kind of suspended animation necessary for the readjustment of the organism. That in its turn produces a disturbance of the entire nervous equilibrium. The surgical operations are only ordinarily painful in their after-effects, but the treatment is long. Six months for the actual treatment, if all goes well, followed by a few more months of complete and absolute quietude, without speech or movement, without light even. Say, a year in all."

Mrs. Fersen lay back silently.

" Are there any more details I can give you ? "

" Not for the moment. I must think it out." Her voice relapsed into a murmur, as if her mind were a thousand miles away. " Three and a quarter to one on, allowing for eventualities which it is possible even you have not been able to foresee. Call it even chances on my being restored to youth of mind and heart and body—and beauty and strength ; and I am rich and free. And I might marry and be happy, and have the power that youth and money and beauty can give. And live life fully as other women live it, as I have never lived it, and have a chance to give happiness to others, to live. . . . Or I might stay as I am and hug the few empty days of life left to me, drift along

without danger and without joy. On the other hand, I might die. I wonder if it is very hard to die. I wonder if it is a sporting bet. . . ." Her voice suddenly lifted to an imperious note as she sat upright and faced Antonius with keen eyes.

" You talked of possibly setting me—or someone else—before the world as a proof of your success. Supposing I agree to submit to your experiment, and, believing I had done enough in risking my life to prove your theory, repudiated your right to blazon me to the world unless I consented? "

Antonius hesitated.

" If you made it a condition, I would accept."

He glanced at Mrs. Fersen, who lay gazing out over the sullen sea as if she had forgotten his presence, and he could not tell from her expression of what she thought.

" It is too big a thing to decide hurriedly," he said at last. " I have done my best to put it all before you clearly and dispassionately, and I do not wish to influence your decision by an iota. There is no hurry, I shall remain in San Francisco for a month at least—longer if you wish—and you can give me your decision any time you like."

He rose, as if to leave her.

" No, stay there," she said abstractedly. " I want to think."

Antonius reseated himself and lit a fresh cigar. For nearly half an hour they sat in silence. From time to time he glanced at Mrs. Fersen's profile as she lay

beside him, dreaming. She had forgotten the ship and the man beside her, and her dreams were of many things. She dreamed of herself as she had been. She saw, as in a mirror, a lovely girl with tawny eyes that matched long ropes of curly hair, with a skin like milk and a mouth that laughed, with slim, long white limbs, whose movement was poetry. She dreamed of lights and laughter, and the burning glances of men; of the feel of soft silk and softer furs; of the flash of jewels, and the joy of swift motion. She dreamed, too, of moonlight and nightingales, and of love—strong, tender love, whose embrace was a haven, and of the word home, and the flicker of firelight, and of the laughter of children, and the clinging of their little hands. . . . She dreamed, too, of pain; of the monstrous fear of an operating-table; of the smell of iodine and chloroform; of little pointed implements with death in their touch; of darkness and immobility; and again of pain, pain agonising, hideous, uncontrollable, of screams from bursting lungs that tortured the air, of madness. And she dreamt of death. . . .

She raised herself suddenly in her chair, looking at Antonius, and her eyes were calm and purposeful.

"I'll take it," she said.

TWO YEARS LATER

CHAPTER III

THE warm glow of the mid-June sunshine slanted in through the long windows of a Knightsbridge drawing-room. It was a pretty room, with an almost ultra-feminine character of taste and arrangement. Coloured soft yellow and silver, it ran the whole width of the house. Through its front windows came the muffled roar of the big thoroughfare; through the back ones could be seen a massing of green trees, and a thread of blue water that was the Serpentine. White rugs lay on the polished floor, and on the walls hung pale Japanese water-colours. Of furniture there was but little, but what struck the attention of a newcomer was the profusion of pretty, costly knick-knacks that lay everywhere—multi-coloured cushions of silk and brocade; curiously carved bowls of rare stones and glassware that held carelessly arranged masses of orchids and sweet-smelling freesia; intricate enamel and lacquer boxes, and little expensive toys that smelt of Paris. The observer would have deduced the owner of the house to be a very feminine person, with a fanciful love of pretty things, and the money with which to gratify the whim of the moment; yet, in spite of its haphazard arrangement, the room and its contents made up a most harmonious and very characteristic whole.

As the footman came in from the next room, carrying glasses and a cocktail shaker, there entered the mistress of the house in a soft rustle of hurry, and at once the observer would have decided that the room could have been devised by no other person. She was a very lovely creature, long and slim and graceful, with a freshness of colouring rarely seen in anyone but a quite young girl, wide-apart eyes of a curious tawny colour that exactly matched thick hair that not even a most scientific shingle, overset by a low tiara of diamonds, could make look set or formal, and a mouth that was naturally red and ripe. It was the Thursday of Ascot week, and the night of the Duchess of Westshire's Ascot ball, and her dress of sophisticated Nile green and glittering beads so exquisitely suited her that its obvious expense no longer seemed a sin.

With swift deftness she mixed two cocktails in little gold-inlaid glasses, and, after a quick glance of inspection at the dining-room next door, took her place at the long window overlooking the Park, pulling the blinds higher so that the after-glow of the June sunlight could stream in. From below her rose the chirruping of two busy sparrows who struggled with an untidy and most unseasonable nest; along the tan cantered a party of belated riders on lumping livery-stable hacks; and a nursemaid bid a lingering good night to her soldier. In spite of a warm summer, the wide stretch of grass where a party of small boys gathered up their cricket things was unusually green

and fresh, and beyond it the line of the Serpentine shone like a streak of burning steel.

The woman at the window stretched her arms wide, with a gesture of all-embracing content.

"Oh, how beautiful it is!" she said to herself aloud. "How beautiful everything is!"

She was so wrapped in her mood of beatitude that she did not hear the opening of the door, and turned with a slight start as a man's voice greeted her.

"Not late I hope, Joanna?" asked Henry Antonius.

"Not a bit," answered Mrs. Fersen.

"I was kept later than I expected at the clinic. Many thanks." He sipped the golden cocktail appreciatively. "You've a genius for these things."

"No need to ask how you are," he said as they sat down to dinner. "You look radiant. You are one of the few women I've met whose light is not dimmed even by a four days' treadmill at Ascot. And I gather from your frock that you are dancing all night again."

"Of course. The England House Ball. Tancred Morries is calling for me later. Aren't you going?"

"I had forgotten it. As you're going, I shall try and look in for supper. I have got to put in an hour at the clinic last thing. It's keeping me pretty busy these days." Joanna nodded understandingly.

"Speaking of the clinic," she resumed later, when the footman had cleared the table, leaving them to their coffee and liqueurs, "how are things going there?"

" Well, I confidently believe. It's too early to say for a certainty. The next month is the crucial time. And, though I believe that now I have got the formula worked out to such a degree of perfection that there is not one chance in a million of failure, one is naturally anxious."

" Of course. So much hangs on it."

" Everything. At present the chief difficulty is to get the nursing part done efficiently and discreetly by people whom one has to keep in the dark as to the real nature of the work. It necessitates my doing all but the roughest spade work myself."

" Don't overdo yourself, or your nerve will go. You've been looking tired lately. I don't believe you give yourself time for sleep."

" I can't afford to. It is only temporary. No one can steal my formula, and later on, when my discovery is proved, there will be no need for secrecy."

" When will that be? "

" By the autumn, I hope. In another few days or so my first subject will have passed the crisis, and will start on the period of recuperation, and my second should not be far behind. By the middle of October I should be able to give the results of my discovery to the medical profession, and to the world at large."

While they were speaking Joanna had led the way into the drawing-room.

" It is the woman, isn't it, whose progress is the most advanced? "

" Yes, though I started on her later. The female

organism responds more quickly to the serum, and the woman was an almost perfect case. The man has presented various rather ticklish complications. I have had to go very warily."

Joanna hesitated a moment.

"They are out of pain now?"

"Very nearly. The woman, at any rate. She has the best resistance I have ever known."

"And the man?"

"He suffers a bit, poor devil."

"Yes, poor, poor devil!" Her voice was deep with pity. "Don't I know it!"

"Don't, my dear."

"Why not? It was worth it. But, my God, the pain! I could not have imagined that the world could hold so much, that a million of people put together could suffer as much as can one small body. It was brutalising. One could have committed any crime, however vile, however degrading, to have escaped it for one little moment. One could have laughed with joy at the least prospect of death. And then, if possible, it got worse, and one was no longer conscious of anything but one great, inchoate vastness of torture that was the universe, that had gone on and would go on for eternity, so that one no longer knew that one had a body or a soul. Oh, my God, that pain!"

"I suffered, too, to see you."

"Did you? Can scientists suffer? But it was worth it—a hundred times worth it. For I who was dead am alive."

" I am glad. That is the sole justification for the cruelty of science. I hope these two poor souls will be glad too. For them I do not mind so much, but with you there was a time—the darkest time—when I was afraid that when you—came back, and remembered, that you would curse me."

" Curse you? Why, you don't know, you can't even begin to imagine——"

" Does life mean so much to you? I ask now as a scientist even more than as a man."

" Shall I show you? "

" How? But, Joanna, we are talking on the forbidden subject. How did I come to let you? "

" For the last time if you will. But look here."

She had taken from a small locked cabinet a photograph, which she handed him. It was a snapshot on board the *Arewa* that had caught her unawares. It showed the Joanna Fersen of two years ago, dressed in a shabby skirt and jumper, leaning against the rails. The brilliant sunshine of a tropical day had ably abetted the cold cruelty of an amateur photograph. It spared not a line of the haggard face, the drooping mouth and tired eyes, the harsh outline of features and thin neck, and the unlovely gauntness of the stooping figure. A group of laughing boys and girls, playing kiss-in-the-ring in the background, set in relief the weariness, loneliness, and dejection of the old, solitary figure.

Antonius looked at the snapshot for a moment, then his eyes travelled appraisingly over the radiant creature

before him—the vivid hair and eyes that, combined with the fresh, pale skin, gave her the air of some sweet tropical flower ; the supple perfection of the rich, slim body in its beautiful gown ; the warm life and magnetism that radiated from her whole being.

" I understand," he said slowly at last. Taking the photograph between his fingers, he held it over the flame of the silver cigarette-lighter beside him, and watched it carefully till every particle was consumed.

" Why did you do that ? " she asked a little breathlessly.

" Because that is over and done with. Because that woman never existed. Because now you are—you."

There was the ghost of tears in her eyes, and a little flutter of tremulous laughter in her voice.

" And once—then—you wanted to show me to the world as your successful experiment. Why did you burn that photo ? "

" Because—well, I can hardly tell you. Because—well, perhaps just because you are—you."

She stared at him for a moment with wide eyes, in which still seemed to linger the ghosts of the past.

" Do you know," she said at last, a little breathlessly, as if she were awe-struck, " there are times—and I don't care if it sounds sacrilegious—when I feel I want to kneel down and worship you."

She broke off as the door opened, and the footman came in carrying a salver piled with letters.

" You'll excuse me ? " Quickly she tore open the envelopes, skimming their contents and throwing

them in an untidy heap on the table beside them. "Nothing thrilling. The usual lot."

With the privilege of an old friend Antonius picked her letters up as she discarded them.

"More letters than I get in a week," he commented. "'Lady Marian Stanley requests'. . . . That does not sound very amusing! 'Marchioness Dacre and Mrs. George Lacey and Madame Kruski and Mrs. Alfred Symes also request.' . . . 'A complimentary sitting of yourself at your earliest convenience.' . . . Four of those. . . . 'To have the honour of meeting H.S.H. The Archduke of Wrexen.' . . . 'Dearest Jo.' . . . Signed by the Princess herself. 'A few words on the subject of our unrivalled face cream.' . . . Madame Jeanne, of Hanover Square, frocks, £173. . . . Bebette, of Bond Street, lingerie, £67. . . . Cartier's, one onyx and diamond brooch. . . . I thought that butterfly was new! Your bills are outrageous, Joanna!"

"Who cares? I told you that mountain was made of gold, and the shares are leaping up like he-goats on the hill-tops. Money keeps rolling in till I have got writer's cramp with signing the coupons."

Antonius continued to run through her correspondence.

"Press cuttings. 'Among those in the Royal Enclosure I noticed the beautiful Mrs. Fersen, whose delicious frock of beige georgette and lace . . .' 'One of the loveliest women at the opera was Mrs. Joanna Fersen, who . . .' 'A little bird whispered to me that

the lovely Mrs. Fersen will be among those . . . '
' Mrs. Fersen, who was in great good looks . . . '
' Things we want to know: Whether Mrs. Jo. Fersen is the most beautiful woman in London, and whether a certain Duke's daughter thinks so. . . .' "

" Oh, Henry, do stop! You sound like a parrot. Just like all the other parrots."

" Are they parrots? I have always myself, in a fashionable gathering, thought of parrots; some pretty little ones, with nice plumage, some with long noses, that scream. No one ever teaches them a new vocabulary. They all scream the same thing as the last parrot."

" Admitted! I know you're laughing at me, but I love them. They are dear parrots."

" Are they? Tell me, what do you think about it all? The parrots and the parrot-house? "

" At first, frankly, I was terribly frightened of it. It was all so new to me, so strange, I didn't even know the language or the customs. It was like being transplanted to Mars. And—and—well, my other life; I was afraid of making mistakes, of giving myself away. Then suddenly it seemed easy; everyone made it so easy for me, and I found I was taken for granted. And now I love it—oh, I love it! "

" Naturally it was made easy for you. You are a very pretty woman, and a rich one."

" Of course. And isn't it wonderful being a rich and pretty woman? It is the most wonderful thing in the world.'

" And a happy one ? "

" Who wouldn't be ? "

" It all satisfies you ? "

" Why not ? "

" Of course. For a moment I had forgotten. For the moment you are in an attitude towards life that must be unique ; all the freshness and novelty of experience of extreme youth with the powers and capacities of maturity. It is the former, I suppose, that made the transition stage pass so easily for you."

" The transition stage ? Oh, I see. Yes, at first, when I came to New York as—myself, as I am now, I felt like my old self. It was uncanny ; it almost frightened me. It was rather like one feels on one's first outing after an illness—a sort of unnaturalness in being dressed and walking about. But, just as quickly as after an illness, that wore off, and I automatically became the present me, with a new set of thoughts and feelings, and a new outlook. Hardly once did I have to act, or think before I said or did anything. I seemed to take the new me for granted. Before the treatment I expected to feel artificial, but I don't. Now, if anyone were to speak of the Joanna Fersen of the Australian days, it would seem as if they spoke of someone else."

" You do not think of those days ? You feel no occasional connection ? "

" None. Isn't it curious ? Even when I do think of it, as now, it all seems at most to have the same relationship as if, say, one had the power to see oneself

in some former reincarnation. How do you account for it ? "

" Because youth naturally discards anything of no purpose to itself. It is only an advanced stage of the infant's forgetfulness and absence of retrospective perspective. Your youth is not artificial and localised, like the factitious youth built up in some women by beauty specialism and glands, but fundamental and genuine."

" Oh, miracle man ! "

" Psychologically your case is even more interesting and instructive to me than physically. I wonder how long your present outlook will last ? "

" Indefinitely, I hope. It is so wonderful."

" Impossible, since your experience will have to grow up to meet your capacity. In other words, you will take life seriously."

" How depressing ! Expound."

" Well, mentally you will become tired of the surface of life that you are now enjoying as a young girl enjoys, and you will look for something deeper to satisfy you."

" What, for example ? "

" Well, there is love."

" I don't want love."

" Not yet, but you will."

" I shan't look for it."

" No, but it will look for you. You are a woman for whom love, without difficulty, will find masculine media ! "

" So I have discovered already ! " she laughed.

" Of course, oh, most beautiful Phœnix ! "

" Phœnix ? "

" Don't you remember ? The beautiful legendary bird that the ancients believed in, who every five hundred years flew to the temple at Heliopolis, and, being burnt to death on the altar, rose again next day from the ashes, new born but full grown, and transcendent. Tacitus believed in him, and Herodotus and Pliny, and they considered him the emblem of the rising sun."

Joanna smiled thoughtfully.

" A pretty allegory. In this case the rising sun of science ? "

" Who knows ? "

She smiled again.

" But, to continue our winged similes, sufficient for the day, etc. The parrot-house hasn't begun to bore me yet."

" How does it strike you apart from the amusement of it ? "

" It's hard to say. I have nothing to compare it by, as you and most people have. Frankly, at first it amazed me, for I had formed my mental picture of London society—as, I suppose, have most people not exactly of it—from the few so-called society novels that had come my way."

" Of course. Studies of the aristocracy by the middle classes, or the drawing-room as seen through the keyhole on the back stairs ! "

"That's about it! They seemed to consist of nothing but the peerage and perfectly trained servants, where all marquises looked romantic, and when old wore side-whiskers, and when young made love in perfect English. In fact, I have never seen so much good English to the square inch! And the villains were always dark and foreign—I beg your pardon, Henry—or wore large checks and knew a lot about horses, and duchesses didn't pay their gambling debts, and everyone under the rank of baronet had a lot of money and dropped their aitches. But here——"

"Yes, here?"

"Well, they all seem much like other people, only a trifle richer, some of them. I am learning it all by degrees, but it took time. Even now I cannot tell a peeress from a *demi-mondaine* at the same night-club, except that the latter generally drinks orangeade and dresses more quietly. And I only knew a man was a peer last night because I heard him borrow money off the *maître d'hôtel* at a restaurant, and I am sure Gustave wouldn't have lent it to him unless he was! And I have met most gentlemanly stockbrokers who do not seem rich, and *nouveaux riches* who talk better English than their footmen, and Americans who do not say 'I guess.' And nobody seems aristocratic; in fact, as a child I should have been sent out of the room for behaving as most of them do, especially the girls. All my preconceived ideas have been upset! Society novelists should be compelled by law to do at least one London season before they write a book."

Antonius chuckled.

" And how does it strike you, Henry? You knew it before, didn't you? "

" Yes, before I migrated finally to Australia I spent two summers in London. I was only a poor young medico in those days, and beneath the great world's notice, except when it was a man short at the last moment to eat its dinners or dance with its daughters. I was young enough to be cynical then, and I am afraid I watched it much in the same light as the son of a cannibal king looks at the plump children that will one day be his meat."

" What a horrible thought! You mean you watched the world digging with its bad habits graves that one day they would pay you good money to save them from? "

" That's about it. Though you might have put it more nicely, if you had compared it to a missionary zeal."

" And now, in the light of your new discovery, how do you regard society? "

" As a case of pulling double for both the medical and the clerical professions."

" I don't believe you are quite as cold-blooded as you make out. You are quite clever enough, as you have proved, to make all the money and fame you wanted in the ordinary course of your profession. Admit that a not altogether cynical motive prompted your long years of work."

" Who knows the mixed motives that underlie every

conscious thought and action—even at this very moment ? "

He seemed to dwell on the last few words, and his tone caught her attention.

" How at this very moment ? "

He did not answer, for at that moment there reached them the sound of voices on the landing outside, and the door opened.

" The Earl of Morries," announced the footman.

CHAPTER IV

"Good evening," said Lord Morries, as he shook hands. "I hope I'm not too early, but Grace Illington has a party at the Embassy to fill in time before we all go on to the England House Ball. I hear one won't be able to get up the stairs if one arrives before one o'clock. And she was very keen that you should come along, so I said I'd try and persuade you."

"I'd love to. I wanted to see Grace, anyway, about that bazaar she has roped me in for. May I introduce Professor Antonius, Lord Morries? Have a whisky and soda."

The two men took stock of each other as Joanna poured out their drinks. Lord Morries, Antonius reflected, was one of the most typically good-looking young Englishmen he had ever seen, about thirty, with a tall, lean, well-set-up figure, and tanned, well-bred, aquiline features. It was only his eyes that distinguished him ever so slightly from hundreds of similar young Englishmen one may see any day walking up Bond Street between Wells and Trufitt's. Though they were of the hard, bright British blue that hints of remote Norse ancestry, something in the expression that flitted across them sometimes showed the dreamer and the idealist, almost the bigot. Morries, looking at Antonius, took an instant dislike to him—the

dislike unreasonable and unreasoning, though he would not have admitted it, of the through and through Britisher for the man of Mediterranean race. The last few years had not been over-kind to Antonius. He was still swarthily handsome, but a sedentary life, much mental strain and burning of midnight oil, had sallowed his dark skin and thickened his powerful figure. With the quick perception of his race, he was aware of the dislike he had inspired ; was, indeed, used to it, and tolerantly indifferent.

After a few minutes' desultory conversation Joanna rose, gathering her cloak and her gloves.

" What about the ball ? " she asked Antonius.

" If you will spare me a dance, I'll look in for half an hour on my way home from the clinic. I suppose you are engaged for supper ? "

" I'm afraid I am, to our young friend here." She gaily designated Morries with her fan. " Though supper with me is a misnomer, for I can never eat after midnight. See you later, then."

" Can we drop you ? " asked Morries, with polite formality, as they stood in the hall.

" No, thanks ; I've got my car." As Antonius spoke a large aluminium Rolls drew up in front of the door.

" That's the doctor fellow I've heard you speak of, isn't it ? " Morries asked Joanna as the taxi raced up Knightsbridge.

" Yes—Henry Antonius. He was a woman's specialist in Sydney, and a very old friend of mine."

" Isn't he supposed to have discovered some new microbe or gland or something ? "

" I don't know. I know he is doing research work over here. What made you think so ? "

" I don't know. I seem to have heard it from one or two people."

" The parrot-house," murmured Joanna to herself.

" What's that ? "

" Nothing. I was only saying that Henry is very clever."

" Henry ? Do you know him as well as all that ? "

" I have known him—all my life almost. Why ? Don't you like him ? I don't believe you do."

" Honestly, not very much. I haven't much use for Levantines. He is an Armenian, isn't he, or something like that ? "

" He had a Syrian father."

" Well, they are all much the same. Clever, of course ; but one hasn't much use for them. No offence to your friend."

" Leaving him out of the question, why exactly ? "

" Well, they're not white to begin with—not that that's everything, for one has known some very decent niggers and whatnot. But there is something fishy about them. They're not like us ; they don't think like us."

" In other words, they're not English ! "

" They aren't—or even American," added Lord Morries generously.

Joanna laughed. "Or even Australian," she said slyly. Morries looked rather sheepish.

"You catch one up too quickly," he said. "You know I did not mean it like that. But, all the same," he added, with a hint of stubbornness, "I'm not quite so stupidly insular as you may think. I spent several years in the Levant round about the end of the war, and saw a good deal of them. Apart from their hair and oily skins, which one doesn't take to, they're not bad fellows, many of them, and, of course, as clever as monkeys; good sportsmen, some of them, and plucky. But underneath there is something that isn't white. They are Orientals, and they've some streak that makes them—well—well, not good to have much to do with."

Joanna smiled again.

"Here endeth the first lesson," she said gaily, as the taxi drew up outside the Embassy Club.

The long, narrow room, with its futuristic *décor*, was a babel of noise and light and congested humanity, a solid wall of voices that seemed a tangible thing, that once more reminded Joanna of Antonius's simile of the parrot-house. On the dance-floor was standing-room only for several hundreds of men and women who feverishly clapped for an encore to a foxtrot that there had been no room to dance. They languidly hated the people at the little tables who took up good dancing space, and the people at the tables hated the dancers because they impeded the quick transit of quails and champagne. As newcomers entered, a

hundred insatiable eyes turned in their direction, as if seeking something new that might stimulate a curiosity that had long since died of satiety. As Joanna and her escort stood in the doorway looking round for their party, a great many eyes turned in their direction, and those of the men were frankly admiring. Each season worthy to be called " brilliant " has its little collection of sensations—its divorce, its heat-wave, its marriage, its rich American, its Academy picture, its beauty ; and Joanna was undoubtedly this season's beauty.

" How people stare these days ! " muttered Lord Morries irritably. " It's a disease. I don't believe it really amuses them. It's like a man who deliberately eats salted almonds to give himself a thirst."

" There they are," said Joanna. " There's Grace."

In the left-hand corner a woman had waved to them, a little wisp of a woman in a short, skin-tight, glittering frock, to whom a kindly distance leant a factitious youth that yielded, close to, to a thirty-five that might be forty in the morning. She reminded one of a little clockwork bird, with her quick movements, incessant gesturing, tiny talon-like hands, and shrill voice.

" My dears, we'd almost given you up," she greeted them. " But we've saved you some champagne."

She hurriedly introduced them to such of the party as they did not know already. The latter was a fairly representative collection of the season's sensations. There was Mrs. Cornelius Smythe, the rich American widow who, it was rumoured, had rung up a Piccadilly

house-agent to inquire if Buckingham Palace was to let for the season. There was Joseph Hart, the very young, long-haired, and long-nosed novelist, who boasted that he had been brought up in the Commercial Road and wrote scathing and obscenely bitter novels of London society. There were the debutante Clavering twins, so absolutely alike in feature and in figure, not to mention the rather sultry reputations they had made for themselves in a remarkably short space of time, that Prince Rolf, the deposed ruler of a small southern European monarchy and alleged to be the wickedest man in London, had been heard to say that not even in the dark could he tell them apart. There was Lord Tarlton, who had won the Gold Vase with a horse he had bought with the money his late American wife had gladly paid to be quit of his infidelities. And there was Caryl Strange—accompanied by her husband—who as Caryl Rose had married Sir Rupert in Timbuktu, from whence they had just returned after her sensational exploits among the men-monkeys in the swamps of Central Africa.

Though nearly midnight, there was no hope of dancing, and the party preferred to sit surreptitiously sipping the champagne that was soon to be wrested from them by apologetic waiters.

"Who is here?" asked Joanna of Joseph Hart, who sat next her. "One can't see the trees for the wood."

"Everybody and nobody," he answered languidly, smoothing back his long black hair with the air of a

man who hopes his picture will appear in next week's *Tatler*.

" Though epigrammatic, that doesn't satisfy me at all," laughed Joanna. " I am so new to London, you know, that I still really like to look at people."

" How refreshing," he said, looking at her with eyes that were not nearly so tired as they deliberately appeared. He glanced at the plate of fried fish and chips which he made an obvious point of ordering in public wherever he went, with the assertion that they reminded him agreeably of the barrow in the Commercial Road where he had been used to take his lunch, though actually his mouth watered at the blue trout and quail that the others were eating. He was considering whether or not he could make anything of Joanna as copy in his new book, *The Ash Pit*. Though beautiful and fashionable, she was, he decided, too healthy, too freshly vivid. The public were still greedy for cynicism, and a change of type might spoil his sales. Perhaps, later on, she might set a new fashion for health. He would keep an eye on her. Meanwhile, she certainly was very pretty. While he ostentatiously helped himself to more chips, he choked down an almost painful longing for the asparagus that Joanna was obviously enjoying, and a faint regret that it was not in his rôle to make love to pretty women. Joanna, for example. What fun it would be to step on her feet under the table! It would certainly be in keeping with fried fish, his fiercely repressed Cockney sense of humour told him, but she

might make a scene. He leant back with a bored air.

" How devastating these places are," he said wearily.

Joanna, to whom the remark had been chiefly addressed, laughed frankly into his face.

" Are they ? I apologise, but I simply love them," she said.

He longed to wink at her.

" How rotten the food here is getting," screamed Lady Illington down the table. " Where did you and Tanks dine ? "

" We didn't dine. I had Henry Antonius dining with me, so Tanks picked me up after."

" Antonius, the new doctor ? Why didn't you bring him along ? I've been dying to meet him. He looks so evil and attractive, and I am told he has got some wonderful discovery that he is going to spring on us soon."

" Really ? I didn't know you wanted to meet him, but I'll introduce him to you at the England House Ball."

" Oh, you angel ! Is he really as thrilling as they say ? "

Without waiting for an answer, Lady Illington kept up a running commentary, audible for several tables round, on the people who passed them on the dance floor, or on anyone whose name suggested itself to her. There was Lady Marian Stanley, who recently had had her face " lifted " by the new man over from Paris, and it was said that one side had been accidentally

lifted higher than the other, so that she had to balance it by a perpetual smile. " It wouldn't matter so much if her front teeth were her own," added Lady Illington pathetically. Was it true, she asked Joseph Hart, that the Cabinet Minister's wife had been offered £20,000 from America for her second edition of *Uncensored Sentences*? Hart, whom the mention of a better seller than himself affected like the toothache, murmured acidly that, if true, it served America right. Then he relapsed into a morose silence. He had definitely decided that Joanna was no use to him as copy, that he had written up the rest of the party already, and that three helpings of fried fish had given him indigestion. The Clavering twins, in undertones, were exchanging tips for to-morrow's racing with two very young Guardsmen of an egg-like neatness and lack of characteristic. Mrs. Cornelius Smythe was memorising the names and faces of as many titled people as she could with a view to her Henley party. Lord Tarlton was hoping that the lady in green at the next table, who had smiled at him discreetly as he came in, did not notice that he was stroking Lady Illington's wrist under the table.

The latter leant forward and touched Joanna on the arm with her fan.

" You *are* coming to Horsham's Mount for my week-end after Ascot, aren't you? " she called.

" It's the first I'd heard of it, but I'd love to," said Joanna.

" How stupid of me! I thought I'd asked you.

Anyway, you *must* come. Tanks is coming, and Hart, and Caryl and Sir Rupert, and Rose."

"Who else?" asked Lord Morries.

"Oh, that's about all, I think. I've rather forgotten. Just a rest-cure after Ascot. Iris Bylaugh was coming, but she found something better to do, so threw over."

"For this freedom many thanks!" murmured Tancred Morries.

"That's a nice way to speak of your fiancée!"

"She is not my fiancée."

"Since when?"

"Since last Saturday. She told me so herself at Hurlingham, just after the Indians beat the Americans."

"That was only a temporary abberation, induced by abnormal conditions. It is kismet, my boy, and may God have mercy on your souls."

Tancred Morries shrugged his shoulders.

The waiters had long since cleared away the drinks, and the crowd on the dance-floor was thinning. The party made a move to go. They were all going on to the England House Ball, except Joseph Hart and Mrs. Cornelius Smythe, who had not received invitations. Hart looked bleakly at the latter, debating in his little Oriental soul whether a free lift home in her Hispano-Suiza, with its liveried footman, would compensate for ten minutes in the company of so much diamond-encrusted flesh.

Outside England House for over a quarter of a mile snorted two rows of cars and taxis.

"This is quite like old times," murmured Lady Illington, as they moved snail-like up the queue. "I missed this party last year as if it had been my own."

"Mr. Simeon Bradston kept up the tradition though, didn't he?" asked Caryl Strange. "I seem to remember that of the year before—the night before I started for Africa—as being quite a good party."

"My dear, I hadn't the heart to go, though I believe the supper was much better. While Bradston had England House the respectable Conservative side of me, not yet drowned in alcohol, went into mourning. And I was told as a fact that an Argentine millionaire mistook the poor duke for the butler on account of his side-whiskers, and ordered him to fetch some champagne and 'damn well be quick about it.' What a mercy that half-wit son of theirs married the Josenheim millions, or London House would have been commodious flats by now."

Up the wide stone steps, past a knot of drab street-loafers, drifted a never-ending tide of people; men immaculately and glossily black and white as a flock of magpies new-washed by rain, women—for it was a year of beads—glittering and shimmering and blending into an iridescent rainbow of colours. Dotted about among the statuary in the gallery, imperfectly concealed as stout prima donnas behind small operatic trees, stood detectives whose elaborate nonchalance concealed a vast Bolshevistic boredom. Down in the hall, as unobtrusively but more alertly, stood the women journalists, miraculously garnering names noble

or new, the gowns of countesses, and the jewels of dollar princesses. Up the broad staircase, garlanded in roses whose scent was beaten down by a rising incense of Houbigant and Coty and Bichara, moved a sea of faces—faces that smiled interminably, meaninglessly.

In the vast rose and gold ballroom the crowd was almost as dense as that at the Embassy Club, but Joanna, susceptible as a newcomer, sensed a difference of atmosphere. "It is like listening to a fugue after a ragtime," she reflected to herself. "The parrot-house is screaming a new note."

"What a mob!" said Tancred Morries in her ear. "I hear the supper-room is open. Let's see if we can find a table."

"I didn't know you were engaged to be married," Joanna said to him later, as at a little table by the long open window they lingered over their coffee and cigarettes.

"I'm not," he answered shortly.

"But apparently you are, though you don't know it," she laughed back at him. "What is the hitch? I imagine I have seen Miss Bylaugh—at Ciro's, I think it was; a very pretty girl, with big, wide-apart eyes and an Eton crop."

"Yes, that is her. She is a cousin of mine. Her father has a small place in Hampshire, not far from mine, and Iris and I played together as kids. She used to bully me like the deuce, from which the family evolved the idea that we should eventually marry."

"Well, why not?"

Morries shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know that either of us particularly wants to," he said. "It was all more or less a kind of mental suggestion on the part of our families—or, rather, used to be. I don't know that mother is as keen on the idea as she was."

"Why not?" He shrugged his shoulders again. "It's about time you married, isn't it? You're thirty, aren't you? And Lady Morries's health keeps her abroad, and you need someone to help you look after the place."

"Yes, somebody; not anybody."

"Do you love it so?"

"Better than anything in the world." She was momentarily surprised at the intensity of his voice. Among a race and in a world that makes a point of only showing the emotions it does not feel, Lord Morries had seemed to her to have no strong feeling about anything whatsoever, except perhaps hunting or shooting. Now she felt a little warm rush of sympathy towards him.

"Tell me about it," she said softly.

"No, I will show it to you instead," he said, "if you will let me."

"Yes, please do."

"You mean it? It wouldn't bore you?" He glanced at her half suspiciously.

"Indeed I do." He smiled at her spontaneously for the first time that evening.

For the next hour in the ballroom she was surrounded

by a crowd of young and middle-aged men, making dance engagements that would have taken a week to fulfil, and gaily and shamelessly breaking them, till she caught sight of Henry Antonius standing alone in a doorway. Shaking off a protesting knot of partners, she went up to him.

"Allah is kind!" he smiled. "Having only just arrived, and alone, only a boorish exhibition of bad manners has saved me from taking three dowagers in succession in to supper. This is the dance you promised me, isn't it?"

"Do you really want to dance, or shall we sit out somewhere cool?"

"Don't you mind?"

"No, indeed. The atmosphere in there is like a mushroom-house, and the world's worst dancers are stampeding on the floor that's like fly-paper."

"Why is it that fashionable people always take their pleasures uncomfortably, I wonder? I had much rather sit out. I'm not in a dancing mood."

"It's after two o'clock, and you've only just arrived. Any trouble?"

"No; but for the next fortnight it's going to be a busy time."

"Poor soul, and you look tired. By the way, I've an invitation for you from Grace Illington, who is dying to meet you, to week-end at Horsham's Mount. Couldn't you manage it? It would do you good."

"Impossible, I'm afraid. I daren't leave London

for the present. So you're going to the Mount—Mount Horsel, are you?" He smiled.

"Why do you laugh? And why Mount Horsel?"

"That is what it was nicknamed by some sharp-tongued wit who had spent a week-end there. Don't you know your Swinburne?"

"Of course. But why? Is it so sultry?"

"You'll be able to tell me when you get back. I've not been there; I only repeat idle gossip. Are you shockable?"

"I don't know, because, as the young man said when asked if he could play the violin, I've never tried."

"Anyway, you won't be bored!"

"Don't tell me any more. Let me judge for myself! But how very gossipy we're becoming! One can't help it; it's infectious. I don't think we all believe half the catty things we say. From congestion London, at this time of year, becomes just one vast organism of staring eyes and chattering tongues. One stares and one talks automatically."

"The four that are never content," murmured Antonius.

"What is that? Are you quoting something?"

"Only Kipling! Don't you know it?"

"No. What?"

"These are the four that are never content,
That have never been filled since the world began,
Jacala's mouth, the glut of the kite,
The hands of the ape, and the eyes of man."

" How true, especially the last ! " Down the corridor they saw Tancred Morries approaching, and he rose to go.

" This looks like a partner," he said. " Well, I wish you a cheery week-end."

" Are you going now ? "

" Yes. I only came for my dance with you."

" Half a dozen fellows waiting at the main entrance under the impression that it's their dance," remarked Morries, as he came up to them, " but I told them they were wrong. There's room to dance at last."

For over five minutes, as they danced round the now half-empty ballroom, Antonius watched them, and as he turned to go he sighed.

CHAPTER V

THE Horsham's Mount party pursued a quiet course for the first twenty-four hours. It was tired after four sun-scorched days at Ascot, and content to go to bed early, and to continue its glut of sleep in long chairs on the shady lawn under the trees.

Iris Bylaugh turned up unexpectedly, late on the Saturday afternoon. She came tearing up the drive, as the party lazily sipped cocktails on the terrace, in a ramshackle two-seater piled high with luggage and a brace of red setters, and unceremoniously plumped herself down among them.

"A double one of that, please," she called to the footman, as he handed a glass to Tarlton.

"Don't kick me out, Grace," she said, turning to her hostess. "I started to week-end at Broadstone with the Trenoxes, but it was so perfectly bloody that I should have died or bust if I had sat out another meal, so I trundled over here for a bed."

"You haven't brought a man, have you?"

"No. I started yesterday with Reggie Dean, but I parked that horror-dog at Broadstone."

"Then that's all right. We're a man over."

"Well, don't expect me to be his plaything of a perfect week-end. I'm fed to the back teeth with men."

"Since when and why?"

"Don't know. Sex dyspepsia, I suppose. I've come over here for a rest-cure."

"You're an optimist if you think you're going to get it!" said Lord Tarlton from behind her, trying to stroke her arm. She shook off his hand with a bored gesture. "You need quassia wash for that sort of garden pest," she said to Lady Illington. "Oh, thank God for that!" She drained at a gulp the cocktail that the footman had handed her. "Another."

When she had finished it she lay back and yawned. "Don't anybody talk to me," she said, "or I shall scream." She closed her eyes.

Joanna looked at her curiously, as she lay there on the grass apparently asleep. She was arresting rather than pretty, she decided, but very attractive, with her slim boy's figure that, however carelessly she moved, was always graceful, short thick mane of reddish-brown hair, and wide-apart, expressive eyes. But there were shadows under them that should not have been there at her age—twenty at the most—and her mouth, too wide and too red, had an unhappy droop when it did not laugh.

"What's the matter with Iris?" asked Lady Illington as all the women except Iris herself, who had bidden them an off-hand good night, forgathered in Joanna's room on their way to bed in the small hours. "She is madder than ever. And what made her come galloping over from Broadstone like that?"

"I was wondering myself," said Caryl Strange. "Something must have happened to upset her. She

is generally pretty mad, but not quite like this. It's her way of hiding that her nerves have all gone to pieces. I know she has lost a lot of money lately that she can't afford."

"Though it is the first time I've seen her," put in Joanna, "she strikes me as being rather unhappy."

"Iris unhappy!" scoffed Lady Illington. "Nothing less than a universal giving out of cocktails would make Iris unhappy. If you ask me, I think she came over solely to see what Tanks is up to. I know she asked him down to Broadstone before she collected Reggie Dean. You look out, Joanna; she is quite capable of slashing your face to ribbons if she suspects you of poaching!" She paid no attention to Joanna's protest as she examined her face under the strong light that hung over the dressing-table. "My God! What a hag I look, and I'm not sure that I'm strictly sober. In fact, I'm sure I'm not! That punch of Tarlton's was damnably strong. I am off."

"She is not giving Tarlton a chance to stray," said Rose Clavering with a giggle.

"Don't be such a precocious little cat," retorted Caryl. "It's not allowed at your age."

"If girls are as middle-aged as they are at twenty," she commented, as Rose went out, still giggling, "there'll be nothing left for them at thirty but second childhood."

"Are these girls typical? You remember it's all new to me, a Colonial."

"Typical of a certain set, poor little devils. Rose

is all right. She is as hard as nails, but eminently healthy ; she is only imitating the others, and is quite capable of taking care of herself. She'll probably make a model wife when she is tired of all this. But Iris is more of a problem. She has got temperament and she is utterly reckless. She goes at life as she goes out hunting—like the devil."

" What's wrong with her to-night, do you think ? "

" Don't know. Some upset at Broadstone, without a doubt. Reggie Dean is doing her no good. I am not sure that Grace wasn't right about Tanks, though."

" Is she in love with him ? "

" I don't think so, but her father is keen on it. I don't think she has much of a time at home. Personally, I hope it won't come off."

" Why ? It seems suitable enough."

" From a worldly point of view, yes ; but temperamentally they are utterly unsuited. They'd drive each other to the devil."

" I can't imagine Tanks going to the devil under any circumstances. He is too—too British ! "

" That's because you haven't known him very long. I have known him since we were both small children. Outside he is the most British thing that was ever made, but he has got a queer character inside, though it's undeveloped. If he hadn't been born a British peer he might have been a fanatic about something or other. As it is, it has all got into the one passion of his life."

" What's that ? "

"Haven't you discovered? His place and its traditions. It's a wonderful old place—Elizabethan. In his father's time they thought they'd have to sell it. Then money came in from somewhere—mines in a bit of north country property, I believe—so since his succession Tanks has been quite comfortably off."

"So could marry Iris if he wanted to?"

"Yes; but I was thinking of her, poor kid. Tanks, though he has a heart of gold, could be very hard. He believes with difficulty, and could be utterly relentless and unforgiving if his belief were shaken. He has generosity, but no elasticity."

"She ought to marry, though."

"Yes, before she has time to spoil her life. . . . Hullo, it's past three o'clock. This is what one calls coming to the country for a rest-cure!"

By next day the party had paired itself off, though not to the satisfaction of all its units—Rose and her Guardsman, of whose name no one seemed quite certain but whom everyone called Socks, because of the radiant footwear he affected; the hostess and Lord Tarlton, who, having been heavily snubbed by Iris and ignored by Joanna, had resigned himself to his predestined rôle. The Stranges were continuing their own honeymoon. Joseph Hart, without an audience and under the mellowing influence of country air, was momentarily becoming humanised, becoming more Cockney and less highbrow, and was doing his best, and without thought of copy, to monopolise Joanna, to the cold fury of Morries, who was taken for long

walks and wild motor runs by Iris, from which they emerged looking quarrelsome. Joanna was conscious of a vague sympathy with the girl for which she could not account, as she had no reason to believe it was reciprocated.

"She is a vitally attractive little bit of the twentieth century," she said to Tarlton and Joseph Hart, as they lay under the trees next day, watching Iris while she played a single at tennis with Rose Clavering. "It is a curious type that the war or something has evolved, so childish for all its apparent grown-upness, so sure of itself, and yet a girl like Iris makes me feel middle-aged and almost maternal."

"They put me out of my stride altogether, modern girls," said Lord Tarlton sleepily, tilting his hat over his eyes. "Damn it, one never knows where one is with them. When I was a lad they were either good or bad. Nowadays one never knows if they're as bad as they behave, or as good as they pretend to be."

"Sphinxes without secrets?" queried Joanna.

"Ginger-beer in champagne bottles," murmured Joseph Hart, and went to sleep.

Lord Tarlton glanced at him, looked suddenly less sleepy, and moved his chair nearer to Joanna.

"And what about you?" he asked. "I can't make you out."

"Because there is nothing to make out. I am quite as good-looking as I appear, and nearly as dull."

"I don't believe you know what you are yourself, and you won't give me a chance to find out," he

grumbled. "No one as beautiful as you could be as good as you seem, and yet if you were as bad as you ought to be you couldn't have kept your looks!"

"How curious men are! With thousands of immoral women in the world to choose from, they resent one virtuous one. I suppose it is an insult to their own attractions."

"Or a challenge? Won't you pick mine up? You don't know what you're missing." She shook her head. "Why? Don't you believe me?"

"Oh, I know you're an excellent teacher."

"How do you know?"

"I have been told so." He looked aggrieved.

"What *bandurlog* women are! Good heavens, if we talked as much about women as women talk about us, there would be nothing to divorce, much less marry."

"Claude," called Lady Illington's voice from the terrace. "Claude, aren't you coming to help me with those letters?"

He frowned regretfully, and rose from the depths of his chair. He bent over Joanna.

"Won't you be nicer to me?"

"I am as nice as I can be in the only way I know how."

"I can show you a better way. Won't you let me?" He stared down into her eyes, and she shook her head again. "Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't amuse me."

"Claude!" called the distant voice fretfully. He scowled, and set off in the direction of the house.

"If I wrote down a conversation as stupid as that in any of my books my publisher would break our contract," said Hart's voice, wide awake and peevish, beside her.

"Hallo! I thought you were asleep. How restful your sex are, Joseph."

"How restful?"

"Because they make no demands upon one's intelligence. If a woman is dull one is absolutely stranded conversationally, but if one has nothing to say to a man one can always flirt with him."

"I don't find that flirtation amuses me any longer."

"Why, Methuselah?"

"If one recognises it as a flirtation only, it's as dull as playing cards for counters; if one doesn't, it's like eating an apple and finding a maggot in it."

"There is such a thing as art for art's sake."

"There is no such thing as art. Art is only a term invented by publishers and picture dealers to extract guineas from wise fools who would otherwise buy shilling editions and eighteenpenny oleographs."

"Are you giving birth to a new chapter, Joseph? Or has merely your lunch disagreed with you?"

"Rather the reverse. Week-ends among the British aristocracy induce a condition of gastronomic beatitude and intellectual stomach-ache."

"It *must* be the lunch! Grace told me herself she couldn't order you fried fish and chips because it made the footmen's mouths water so."

"You're wanted, both of you," cried the voice of

Socks behind them. "They're starting chemmy in the oak room, and sent me to fetch you. We are all trying to make our week-end expenses."

"Well, I'm sorry for the housemaid who won't get any tip from me," said Iris as they rose from the table when the dressing-gong sounded. She had lost fifty pounds, and her face was rather white.

Local neighbours came in to dine that night—the heavy-handed trio of a sporting squire, his pink-faced wife, and still more pink-faced daughter. The latter was placed between Hart and Lord Tarlton. The former induced in her a terrified conviction of his lunacy; the latter, to the suppressed mirth of the others, wooed her as a boa-constrictor woos a rabbit, till the very lobes of her ears became scarlet with a delicious scandalised thrill.

"Grace is rather wonderful, isn't she?" whispered Rose after dinner, as they watched their hostess, with the sudden gracious dignity of the complete lady of the manor, dispensing barley-water and parish talk to her guests. "What versatility!"

"That is the supreme test of the aristocracy as against the *nouveau niche*," said Hart sententiously. "Pluck and the ability to rise to the occasion. In moments of stress blood *will* tell."

"Hush!" whispered Socks. "I actually believe Tarlton has had the nerve to kiss her!" He nodded his head towards the terrace, where the voice of the pink-faced daughter was heard raised in a faint scream.

" And she's liked it ! " added Rose, as the scream was followed by a giggle.

The evening dragged heavily, till at eleven the butler announced the carriage. A sigh of relief went up as the sound of wheels receded in the distance.

" Drinks, for God's love ! " cried Grace. " I thought the evening would never end."

" So did everyone except Tarlton. He was enjoying himself ! "

" Claude, was it the first time she'd ever been kissed ? " He twisted his moustache self-consciously.

" Don't be an ass ; tell us."

" She didn't actually say so, but, in view of her lack of technique, I should imagine that it was."

" What a shame, Claude. Poor girl, now she'll be like the tiger that has got a taste for blood."

" You flatter my tuition, Rose." He shot a malicious glance at Joanna.

" What can we do," cried Grace, " to take the taste of respectability out of our mouths ? " There was a chorus of suggestions.

" Hide and seek," cried someone.

" We didn't ask for bedroom scenes ! "

" Kiss in the ring."

" Too unselfish."

" Chemmy."

" Too expensive."

" Bridge."

" Why not spillikins ? "—derisively.

" We want something new. What can we do that we've never done before? "

" There isn't anything! "

" What about strip poker? " asked Lord Tarlton.

" Strip poker! What's that? "

" You sit in a circle on the floor, and someone deals a pack of cards. Whoever draws the lowest number takes off some article of clothing. Hairpins and jewellery don't count."

There was a chorus of applause.

" A brain-wave, Claude! " cried Lady Illington.

" Any limits? "

" None! "

" What's the prize for the winner? " demanded Rose.

" Anything you like that doesn't cost money."

Lord Tarlton looked at her meaningly, whereat she made a derisive face.

Everyone made a ring on the floor except Caryl Strange, who, at a glance from her husband, moved to the door.

" You'll have to leave us out, dear friends," she said, smiling. " It's after midnight. I start on my lecture tour up North on Wednesday, and not a line prepared. I am going to wrap a towel round my forehead and dig my inner consciousness for facts, while Rupert takes down the results. See you later."

" Cowards! "

" You're not going to join in this saturnalia, are you? " whispered Morries in Joanna's ear.

A spirit of perversity seized her.

"Why not?"

"Can't you imagine what it'll be like? Let's go and sit on the terrace."

Joanna had been wavering in her own mind whether or not she should join in the game, but the proprietary tone in Morries's voice annoyed her.

"Don't be a prig. Of course I'm going to play."

"Please don't, Joanna."

"I'm going to! I want to complete my course of education in British society!"

"British society!" His tone was scornful. "Well, I'm not going to. I'm off to bed."

"He's showing off. He'd have played strip poker fast enough if you hadn't been here," commented Grace Illington.

"Yet he'd strip better than most of us," said Socks thoughtfully, with a glance at Joseph Hart, who pretended not to hear.

The deal went round, and the lowest card fell to Joanna, who smiled, and, removing one shoe, placed it in the pool.

"A pair of shoes counts as only one garment," said Lord Tarlton, grinning at her maliciously. "So do stockings."

"Not stockings. That rushes the game too much. We don't wear much these days."

"As you like."

The next deal fell to Hart, who removed his tie,

also the next, which denuded him of his collar. The next dozen deals fell fairly evenly distributed, so that the party soon sat dishevelled, minus shoes, stockings, coats, or waistcoats.

Then the deal fell to Joanna.

"Frock! Frock!" cried the party. After a moment's hesitation she defiantly seized her glittering dress by its shoulder-straps, and with a quick movement pulled it over her head. There was a howl of disappointment.

"She has got a petticoat on! What a fraud! That's not playing fair!" With a smile and a quick, demure gesture she tucked the filmy garment round her bare crossed feet.

"Just you wait, my girl!" called Grace Illington warningly. Lord Tarlton edged a little nearer.

He continued dealing. Socks leant back and poured himself a drink as he shed his trousers. Joanna was regretting now that she had joined in the game. The babel of voices and laughter had died down. From time to time someone poured out a drink and swallowed it rapidly. Tarlton was dealing swiftly, calling the result of each deal in a brief voice. The faces were flushed, and those of the men had a furtively eager expression. To Joanna it seemed that the atmosphere, that before had been merely boisterously merry, had become feverish and unclean. She heartily wished she were out of it, but had not the moral courage to leave. She was afraid of being called a prig. She wished Morries had not left them, and she felt a sudden dislike

to all the other men, none of whom were quite sober, or the women either.

"Damnation!" Somebody had spilt the whisky decanter, and a stream of amber liquid trickled across the floor. By now all the party but Joanna, whose luck had held, were down to their last layer of clothing. She thought how repulsive most of the men looked, but she could not help admiring the almost boyish beauty of Iris's figure, built of slight, clean lines and firm, slim muscles.

"Three, Hart; three, Grace; two, Rose. Rose, don't jib!" She knelt there with no covering but a flimsy chemise, looking at them defiantly.

"Oh, I'm not jibbing," she said, but her hands lingered as they reached up to the ribbon shoulder-straps.

"Lights out," called Socks, as he leant backwards to the switch. The room was plunged in darkness.

"Good boy! Damn you! Mind my drink! Oh, what's that!"

There was a brief pandemonium of voices that ended in a sudden silence. Joanna felt someone seize her by the waist, and violently wrenched herself free. A foot struck her hard in the back, that, from a muttered apology, she guessed to belong to Hart. A giggle sounded close to her, and another at the end of the room that was followed by a man's muffled laugh. The silence seemed overwhelming, oppressive, broken by the soft scuffling sound of bodies that moved cautiously on all fours, and an occasional laugh that

broke off suddenly, as if smothered. Joanna wondered where the door was, but had lost all sense of direction in the pitch darkness. Sometimes a bare arm or leg brushed against her, and groping hands tried to seize her, but she evaded them. The scuffling sounds came closer to her, and she was aware of two persons in particular who tried to locate her. Several times she struck out blindly at one of them whom she imagined to be Tarlton. Once the unseen being short-circuited her, and, seizing her from behind, kissed the back of her neck.

" You little devil ! " She had landed her fist full in his face. But he was too quick for her, and seized her in both arms, pinning her down. In silence she struggled for a minute, sickened by a warm breath that smelt of whisky, and by the hot, eager pressure of hands that tried to caress her. The heavy, whispering silence of the room oppressed and half frightened her. The darkness seemed full of unwholesome violence, of hushed evil.

Again she bumped into someone, who seized her firmly by the shoulders. She struck out with her left hand.

" It's all right," whispered Hart's voice. " Don't worry. Had enough of it ? "

" *Yes !* "

" Come along. I've located the door."

His hand found hers, and he led her slowly, feeling his way through the darkness, till his groping hand fell on the door-handle. The room beyond was lit up,

and as she slipped through she saw, by a chink of light that streamed in, a confused medley of naked or half-naked figures, some of them intertwined, of overturned bottles and glasses, and of a wild confusion of strewn garments.

"Here's your frock," said Hart, as he closed the door, "and your shoes. Couldn't find the rest."

Gratefully she slipped the dress over her head, and patted her hair into some sort of order. Hart, failing to find his own clothing, had snatched up and donned some kind of furry burnous, in which he looked singularly well suited. With a sudden resumption of his habitual bored manner, he poured himself a drink and lit a cigarette.

"Quite a cheery party, what?" he drawled languidly. Joanna laughed outright.

"You were a good chap, Joseph," she said. For a moment he looked natural, almost boyish.

"Was I?" he queried. "I was wondering—I feared it might be the instinct of my lower middle class training," he said, lapsing back into his professional pose.

The door opened, and Rupert and Caryl Strange tiptoed in.

"Intellectual strain induced a thirst," said the latter. "So we've come down to see if there's a drink left."

"So you've had enough!" Sir Rupert nodded his head at the inner room. "Thought you would. They didn't notice us."

" Rather reminded me of the African bush," added Caryl. " Hullo, another defaulter."

Morries strolled in from the terrace smoking a cigar. He gave a quick glance at Joanna, who once more looked infinitely cool and neat after brief recourse to her vanity bag.

" Anyone coming for a stroll on the terrace? " he asked. " It's a heavenly night. Won't you come? " He addressed Joanna directly, as Caryl and Rupert moved towards the stairs.

" No, thanks. I thought you were going to bed." Her tone was almost insultingly cold.

" I changed my mind. Why won't you come? "

" Because I prefer bed to the terrace. Good night."

" To the terrace with me, I suppose you mean."

She did not answer as she drifted up the stairs. He watched her retreating back for a moment, and, ignoring Hart, who lay back in a big armchair smiling languidly, jabbed his cigar viciously into the ash-tray and went back to the terrace by himself.

Joanna was in her nightdress, on the point of stepping into bed, when there came a tap at the door.

" Come in," she called, and Iris Bylaugh tiptoed in, wrapped in her dressing-gown.

" Sorry to butt in," she said casually, " but I saw a light under your door—— By God ! " she broke off suddenly, staring at Joanna, " but you are the loveliest thing I ever saw. I thought you were too good to be true, but damme if there's any fake about it."

Joanna laughed.

"Sit down and have a cigarette," she said, "and tell me about the party."

"You slipped off pretty early. Fed up with us?"

"No, I was sleepy."

"That's a lie!" Iris made a little face. "But I don't wonder. Grace is blind to the wide. It took her suddenly, so we've just put her to bed. By the way, I've got a splitting head, and what I really came in for was to ask if you've got any bromide to ensure my maiden slumbers."

"I haven't, and if I had I wouldn't give it to you, you bad girl; but I have got some aspirin, and here's some stuff to rub in. Don't sniff at it so suspiciously; it's really wonderful."

"Thanks." Iris measured herself three aspirins, and rubbed some of the liquid on to her hot face. "It's rather good."

"How did the party end up?"

"Rather suddenly when Grace passed out. Everyone was getting pretty poisonous. When we'd finished ministering to Grace upstairs I went down with Socks and Rose to see if there was a drink left, and found Tanks pacing the terrace like a special constable with an inferiority complex, and Joseph sound asleep in the oak room, wrapped up in some kind of fancy dress that made him look more like a Bagdad carpet merchant than he does already. He was your Galahad, wasn't he?" She grinned. "I really believe the little man, under all his pose of a decadent satyr, has as sweet a little soul as any draper's assistant in

Finchley. Well, I must push off. Sorry you don't like our parties."

"Do you like them?"

"Not particularly, but what can one do? One must kill time somehow. Life would be all right if it wasn't for men."

"Yet we marry them."

"Because there's nothing better to marry. Tanks is showing you over his ancestral domain to-morrow, isn't he?"

"He said something about it."

"I live next door, but I shan't be there to-morrow. You must come down to my place some time, and we'll see if we can do a better week-end for you."

"Haven't you enjoyed this one?"

"No; I've only hated it a shade less than the one I left at Broadstone."

"What was wrong with that one?"

"Everything." She meditated. "Funny things, men. If you're bad they don't respect you. If you're good they don't want you."

"Always the latter?"

"Unless you have money. Then they'll come to tea with you for hours and talk about themselves, but they won't ask you out to lunch. What is life without lunch?" she murmured meditatively.

"You're a queer child," smiled Joanna. "I'm not a man, but will you lunch with me in London?"

"Have you a decent cellar?"

"As good as money can buy!"

" Then I'll come." But a sudden smile that made her look unexpectedly young belied the rudeness of her words. " I am blathering, but I'm really off this time."

" How's the head ? "

" Better. Night-night." She held out her hand mannishly. Joanna bent to kiss her ; the girl hesitated awkwardly, then held up her face.

" I hate women as a rule," she said, " but you're a good chap, Joanna."

She went out, slamming the door behind her.

CHAPTER VI

NEXT morning the party straggled down to breakfast looking jaded and but half awake. There was a great run on black coffee, and but little on the silver dishes on the sideboard that gave out an appetising aroma.

"If the cook had had the intuition of a woodlouse, she'd have served up prairie oysters instead of mushrooms," murmured Socks, as he helped himself liberally to dry toast.

"The morning after that is not soothed by the ministrations of Perkins almost converts me to teetotalism," agreed Tarlton. "Doesn't it you, Hart?"

"I slept well," said the novelist loftily.

"So the housemaid noticed when she found you asleep in the oak room this morning," grinned Rose.

"I wonder what the servants think of us?" asked Joanna, who alone seemed to have any appetite.

"I asked my valet once," said Tarlton, "and he said 'seein' what larks the gentry was up to' had prevented him from becoming a Socialist. I think he had some obscure but sound conviction that Socialism let at large would damp the *joie de vivre* of life."

"We'll miss the train if we don't hustle," said Iris. "They announced the cars ten minutes ago."

"And now arises a delicate problem of *savoir faire*," said Tarlton, "that I have never seen expounded in

the little shilling manuals. Is it better manners under the circumstances to steal silently away, or with noisy adieux to awaken our kind hostess to a world that must obviously consist of one large headache and a mouth like pea soup? "

" We'll split it with a communal letter. Wonder if I can sign my name this morning? "

While they crowded round the writing-table in the hall, Morries approached Joanna.

" I hope you're not so annoyed with me that you won't keep your promise to come over to Carlyon? " he asked in a low voice.

" No, of course. I've been looking forward to it most awfully."

" You're a dear! As soon as Grace is awake we'll start. We can do it by lunch, have a quiet afternoon, and I'll get you up to town in time for dinner."

The drive through the winding Hampshire lanes was a silent one. Morries's expression as he drove was abstracted, as if he were deep in thought. Joanna was conscious of a slight sense of lassitude, of a fatigue that was more mental than physical. She passed in review the week-end that she had just spent. It had undoubtedly amused and interested her, and at the time she had believed herself to be enjoying it, but now she was conscious of relief that it was over. Her fellow-guests had been a cheery crowd, good-hearted enough at bottom, and in their outlook on the playground of the world there was more vulgarity than real evil, but she recognised now, for the first

time concretely, that as a permanency she could have little in common with them. There was in them a lack of something, somewhere, that she could not quite define, but that she decided was the lack of a real motive for existing. She thought of twenty-year-old Iris's remark, "One must kill time somehow." With the exception of Caryl Strange, they played through life because life had taught them nothing else to do. For most of them the game long since had lost its savour, but yet an infinity of time still remained to be killed.

The trend of her own thoughts caught her sudden attention.

"Am I getting blasée, as Antonius said I should? I hope I'm not. I don't think so. Everyone is not like the Mount people. It's just that my Colonial susceptibilities have been a little scandalised." But, looking round at the large circle of acquaintances that five months in London had made for her, she could scarcely name one whom she felt she could call a friend.

"We're nearly there," said Morries's voice at her side. The car had slowed up, and they were turning in through two big iron gates, flanked by a lodge of mellow red brick, standing in a tiny garden brilliant with hollyhocks and sunflowers. She gave a small gasp of pleasure as, bowling along an elm-shaded drive, they turned a corner and ran alongside a great lake, rippleless and glittering in the June sunshine, bordered with high rush and water-lilies.

" Oh, drive slowly ! " she cried. He looked pleased at her exclamation.

" It is rather jolly, isn't it ? " he said. " Look, there's a fish jumping. He's a big 'un." Startled by the car, a flock of wild geese rose from the reeds and fled upwards, honking as they flew, their long necks outstretched.

" There's the heronry," said Morries, pointing to a tiny island. " I remember on my ninth birthday I sneaked a boat and went out there before breakfast to climb for eggs. I got a dozen—too many for my pockets—so I brought down one in my mouth. It was a stiffish climb, and as I slid down the last lap it broke in my mouth, and it was a bad one. The family wondered why I was sick in the middle of breakfast till they found the remains of egg on my Norfolk jacket. Thereafter it was a rotten birthday—all belting and castor oil." He chuckled at the recollection.

At the end of the two-mile drive the house came in sight—a long, E-shaped building of untouched Elizabethan architecture, surrounded by great velvety lawns studded with formal beds of bright flowers. On the flagged terrace strutted a family of peacocks, and a flock of fantail pigeons fluttered away at their approach. Joanna stared in silence. Ever since she had arrived in England she had lived in London, and this was the first time she had seen a really fine English country house. And Carlyon in the late lord's time had been a show place, to see which several hundred

trippers from the Hampshire seaside towns had paid their sixpence every Tuesday. Morries watched her face with a grave smile.

" What's the verdict ? " he asked.

" Oh, it's like a dream castle," she breathed. " I didn't know a house could be so beautiful. It's like the castle of a fairy princess."

" We don't keep a fairy princess at the moment, I'm afraid, but we have the ghosts of several, so the old people say, and very naughty little princesses they were too, some of them. One of them is said to have incurred the jealous wrath of the Virgin Queen herself —Lady Priscilla Carlyon she was—and they married her off at eighteen to our neighbour, the bold, bad Baron Granton, but she died soon after, and her ghost comes back to visit her old home and the rose garden where she had held tryst with her gallant. She had yellow hair, and must have been the tiniest little thing, judging by some of her frocks which we still have, and even your absurd feet couldn't get into her shoes."

" Oh, and a real drawbridge ! " cried Joanna.

" Yes, and it works too. My great-uncle used to insist on it being pulled up every night at sundown. One Sunday, when a neighbouring squire came over to dine, he forgot to countermand the order—or else, as it is suggested, the squire was unpopular with the servants—and the wretched man rode straight into the moat, and there were four feet of muddy water in it then ! "

He led the way across the drawbridge under an arch guarded by carved lions, and through a small stone courtyard into a lofty flagged hall walled with tapestry and dim pictures of bygone Carlyons; big, fair men in doublet and hose, in the plate armour and lace collars of the Cromwellian period, in the waisted coats of Queen Anne, and the embroidered waistcoats and full bottom wigs of the Georges.

"And they're all exactly like you," said Joanna, after a quick inspection.

"Yes, we Carlyons run to type. None of us take after our mothers, though we chose pretty ones."

"You did." Joanna was studying the faces of lovely dead ladies, in ringlets and powder, in chignons, in hoops and crinolines and bustles. At the far end of the hall was a portrait of Tancred Morries himself, by Sargent, in polo kit. Beside it was an empty space, and Joanna imagined it filled by Iris Bylaugh as she had last seen her—in abbreviated skirt, bright Fair Isle sweater, and canary stockings, with her Eton crop and air of an impudent unhappy boy—and she shook her head with a vague dissatisfaction.

"I must apologise for my butler," said Morries, as they sat down to lunch in a low, oak-panelled room. "Oh, you needn't trouble about his feelings, for he is stone deaf. He has been with us, 'man and boy,' as he calls it, since the late, late man's time. He got too old for work, besides having a predilection for almost extinct port, and at my father's death, five years ago, was pensioned off and sent to live with his married

daughter at Flixton-on-Sea. One morning, a month later, mother and I found him dishing up breakfast in the serving-room, while the promoted first footman cowered, terrified, in the pantry. Half an hour later, by motor bicycle, arrived the son-in-law to plead for him. Would you believe it, the poor old beggar, without saying a word, had gone out after supper, and had walked the whole damned way—nearly forty miles—in the night. He was just dying of a broken heart, the son-in-law said, at being separated from Carlyon. Of course, he's a fixture for life, and all the port he can put away."

"What a darling! It doesn't seem possible, these Socialistic days."

"Yes, our parents didn't know the meaning of the words 'servant troubles.' As a young footman old Horton got twelve pounds a year, and slept on a mattress in a small stone hall from which, a year or two ago, we moved our golden collie because it seemed too cold and draughty a place for an indoor dog to sleep in."

"And Grace was telling me that her servants threaten to leave because there is only one servants' bathroom."

"Yes, and my valet almost did the same because I wouldn't install a listening-in set in the pantry."

"Perhaps they didn't have week-end parties like ours," said Joanna, with a smile that was half propitiatory, half malicious. Morries laughed.

"I am not so sure. My great-uncle used to say

that Horton was the best chap he had ever known to put a guest to bed who had slipped under the dinner-table. They were four-bottle men in those days."

After lunch he showed her over the house—showed her the big, dust-sheeted drawing-rooms full of treasures that Simonds, the famous art dealer, was reported to have sat and cried over because there are yet a few things in the world that money will not buy ; the long, low library, smelling of musty old parchment, where two ruffled Cavaliers of Stewart days fought all one afternoon for the honour of a lady ; and the little gallery above, where, said scandalous tongues, the lady in question had sat unseen, watching the fight, her little white fingers in the hand of a third and favoured suitor ; and the secret staircase by which gay Lady Priscilla was used to keep her tryst in the rose garden, and the little faded white frock and tiny flat-heeled satin shoes she had worn on her sad wedding-day ; and the galleried hall, where the Tancred Carlyon of the day defied the emissary of Cromwell with a scented gauntlet glove thrown down, and where a later Tancred, Lord Morries, had plotted to save a King his life ; and the crypt, where knelt in effigy lords and ladies of Carlyon dressed in wimple and farthingale, with rows of progeny, little stiff replicas of themselves, under the tattered fragments of strange foreign flags.

He showed her, too, the garden ; the cypress avenue where on All Souls' Day, it was said, walked a score of hooded monks, telling their beads and chanting an Ave for the souls of dead Carlyons ; and the orangery

made by the dark-haired bride, captured in the war of the Armada, of the first Lord Morries; and the giant mulberry-tree planted by Tancred's own mother on her wedding-day; and the rose garden where, it was still said by the gardeners, walked the ghost of little Lady Priscilla, that cried ghostly tears as it leant over the roses that had been named after her. He took her for a walk, too, across the park, among bracken where grazed the fallow deer, and showed her the great oak-tree that had been planted to commemorate the Battle of Waterloo, out of which, as a child, he himself had once fallen and cracked his curly head.

She followed him silently, absorbing the atmosphere of it all, betraying her feelings only by an occasional intake of the breath, or a soft murmuring that, to Morries as he watched her rapt face, sounded like the cooing of a dove. She was silent as they sat at tea on the terrace, and from the expression of her eyes as she gazed at the house, and the blue lake that shimmered beyond it, it would seem that she dreamed. Once her eyes met his gravely watching her, and she smiled half apologetically.

"It's so new to me, so strangely beautiful, that for once I am deprived of speech," she said. "This is my first experience of what life in England—the old England, the real England—is and really means, and it has caught me by the throat somehow. I can't express it."

"I know," he murmured.

"Do you know, I used to wonder why people lived

in the country. Now, seeing all this, I wonder why they live in towns."

"I am glad you see it like that, if only for a moment. I wondered what you would feel about it, what you would see in it all."

"See in it? To someone like me, who comes from a new country without history, without traditions, one sees—oh, perhaps more than those who live in it, who are of it. In towns and new countries one sees—well, one sees people; fine people, too, lots of them, striving and fighting and creating, creating things to make the world go on. They have got to be, of course; the world couldn't go on without them. But here one sees why the world has been made at all, right through countless generations, from the time when the first sod of ground was turned up by the first hand-made plough—the real solid world, the real solid people who have made life possible for the rest of us, who have made the real basis of things, the foundation, the framework of what is now and will come after. People talk of progress. Each stone here, each tree, each funny old tradition even, represents more progress than any scientific discovery or mechanical invention that we moderns make so much noise about." Joanna's flower-like face had wrinkled itself in her earnestness, in her endeavour to express the new ideas and emotions that jostled in her brain. Morries watched her intently.

"You are rather a wonderful person," he said at last slowly. "Do you know, I believe you are expressing in actual words what I have always vaguely

felt inside myself, without knowing exactly what it was or how to say it. It has been that, I think, that has made me more than love the place ; that has made me seem part of it, and made any sacrifice seem worth while to keep and preserve it. I, of course, have lived here all my life, have inherited the unreasoning but undying tradition. It is rather wonderful of you to have seen it and felt it, and to have expressed it."

" Oh, you mustn't judge me entirely by our week-end at the Mount ! "

" I don't. And, now that you have given me an opening, I want—I've been wanting all day—to apologise for being such a surly brute. You must have thought me a damned prig. I am not as a rule ; I don't know what took me."

" Don't, please. I wasn't offended, and I don't think I misunderstood. I was just being spoilt and tiresome."

" Let me finish. I'd hate to have any misunderstanding between us. I didn't misunderstand you either, or misjudge you. Good heavens, I've done thousands of these parties, and jolly good fun too, and it's natural that you, who are young and gay and beautiful, who everyone adores, should want to do and see everything. I hope we will have some more binges. But at the moment—I can't quite explain—well, you have always seemed so different from the women one meets in town. I am not running them down—they're jolly good fellows, lots of them—but, well, you're so different ; so much fresher, less jaded

and shop-worn; so much newer, somehow, and sweeter, that for the moment it seemed like watching a child listening to a dirty story. That's absurd, of course, because you're not a child, and you're very wise, but you just seemed too good for it all. I made an ass of myself, but it was all a compliment to you! Am I forgiven?" His smile was very young and rather attractive, and she smiled in return.

"There was nothing to forgive. You must remember I am a 'hay seed,' as the Americans call it. I just want to see everything for once, as an American does 'sights.'"

"Of course. And what did you think of that particular 'sight'?"

"It interested me, and at first amused me. Now, having spent the day here, I feel as if I had had a nice cool bath after getting hot and dirty."

"That's a lovely way of putting it! I can't imagine most women feeling that way about it."

"No? Don't you suppose that 'most women,' after a rarefied diet, come back in time with relief to wholesome fare?"

"Not likely; for in time the palate becomes spoilt. Most of our lot have lived too hard; their nerves are too strung up. The tradition of all this, for example, except as a week-end novelty, would bore them."

"I'm not talking necessarily of the night-club world or the Bright Young People. There are lots of women, living mostly in the country, who are not hard and hectic."

"There you are. We, too, have become infected. The simple maiden in her prime, as the poet described her, lacks the vital spark that a more complicated and highly seasoned way of living has made us demand. We want too much; we've been brought up to expect too much."

"Yes, siren and house *frau*, mistress, wife, and mother, plaything and intellectual mate, all under one perfect skin that must owe nothing to the beauty specialist! That's about it, isn't it?"

"About! It's a problem, isn't it?"

"How will you solve it?"

"Can't think. Can you imagine Iris Bylaugh here, for example, feeling what you feel, expressing what you have felt, though she is a jolly good sort in lots of ways?"

"I think you do her, and lots of other girls, less than justice. As you said yourself, the other is only a phase."

"A phase that has become a habit, if not a disease, with most people. To take away excitement from most of our crowd is like taking away the cocaine from a dope fiend."

The sun had dropped behind the lowest branches of the cedars, and Morries went to order the car. As they raced silently through cool sunset air it seemed to Joanna that some of the spirit of Carlyon had come with her, and she felt infinitely calm and at peace. It was seven o'clock when Morries dropped her at the house in Knightsbridge. On the steps she turned to him with a smile.

"Thank you," she said, "for one of the happiest days I have ever spent."

He held her hand for a moment gravely.

"And thank you too," he said. "And thank you for saying it. It's been the same to me. We must have some more of them." He hesitated. "It has made me more fond of Carlyon than ever," he said, a trifle awkwardly, as he turned slowly down the steps.

CHAPTER VII

THE season waxed and waned, burst into a final flicker at the Eton and Harrow match, and was no more. London took on an air of *négligé* ; men walked abroad openly in grey flannel suits, pretty women looked fagged under their make-up, in all the main thoroughfares great yawning chasms bristled with mysterious piping that looked oddly like the intestines of some monstrous bird, and every taxi raced stationwards lopsided with luggage.

Some people talked of Carlsbad or Deauville, some of Goodwood and Cowes. Joanna Fersen had been one of the latter, but at the last moment she threw over an invitation for Mrs. Cornelius Smythe's yacht and booked a sleeper to Inverness instead.

"I feel, if I eat another quail or drink another cocktail, or have to change my frock more than once a day, or listen to any more ragtime, or scandal, or compliments, I shall have toothache!" she said to Henry Antonius the evening before her departure, as she dined at his house in Regent's Park. "I've got a sudden uncontrollable craving for plain food, fresh air, cold water, and nice dull, unsubtle people."

Antonius laughed.

"Well, you've earned your social toothache all right," he said. "For the last six months you seem

to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion. Anyway, you look wonderfully well on it."

"Oh, yes, I've loved every minute of it; it's been wonderful fun. All the same," she continued, after a pause, "I don't think I'm particularly cut out for society. It's all right for a bit, but, once one has done everything, there is nothing to do but to do it all over again. I don't know how they bear it, these people. Forty, fifty, sixty years old or more, many of them, and they've done the same thing, year in, year out, since they first grew up. Years ahead they can foresee exactly, barring being dead, at any given moment of the year where they will be, what doing, eating, saying, wearing. And, however rich or beautiful or clever, when they die no one really cares. A few people will say 'Poor chap,' and send a wreath, and there's a little bit in *The Times*, and their world closes over the tiny hole they've made and forgets them."

"Yes, and they all think they are really alive. It's a kind of crowd mesmerism. One has to be an outsider to see that they're not. But if you've seen it, and if you feel you can't fall into line, what will you do with yourself?"

"I don't know. Something will probably suggest itself. There must be plenty of things worth doing when the time is ripe for them."

"You will undoubtedly marry."

"I don't think so, but one never knows. I feel no particular inclination that way."

"Not for its own sake, you wouldn't. Perhaps it's

a pity, for when, if ever, you love, it will be overwhelming. Love, if it overtakes you, will utterly possess you. If it is not a happy love, it will be devastating. Marriage—a calm, unemotional marriage might be a safeguard."

"It all sounds most depressing! Let's change the subject. I'm getting egotistical these days. Tell me about yourself. Is there any chance of your getting away this month?"

"Not a hope. If all goes well, I might take a week in September perhaps."

"I'm sorry. You need a change. You look tired, Henry dear."

"I am tired, but what does it matter? There will be plenty of time to rest later on."

"Things going well?"

"Very, as far as one can humanly tell. But I have got to stick to it. Later on, by the time all you gay folks are back again in October, will come my reward." For the moment it seemed as if he had forgotten her presence, and his black eyes stared beyond her, as if they did not see her.

"You deserve it."

"I want it. By God, I want it!" For the first time since she had known him he had dropped his mask of bland indifference. His face had lost its tired, worn expression, and seemed literally to burn with some fierce enthusiasm. She was startled at the sudden transfiguration.

"Tell me," she breathed softly. He stared at her

unseeingly for a minute, and when he answered his voice was low and concentrated.

" Perhaps you, of all people in the world, can, or could, imagine what it is to want a dream to come true, unbearably, overwhelmingly, to the exclusion of everything else. I have waited for the realisation of mine for forty years almost, since I was a ragged, half-starved little lad who, summer and winter, played all day in the dirty by-ways of Aleppo, till my dream came to me, and ambition. Then I spent every hour and every minute I could spare from my father's shop reading books, whose price I had to steal or beg whiningly from the rich English and American tourists that were then not so numerous as they are now. And for these dreams my father used to beat me when he was drunk. Those years—those ghastly, barefaced years! I had to have money, and I stole it—stole it from my father's till when he was lying in the room unconscious from Aleppo fever; and I ran away to Smyrna, where I stole more money, then to Constantinople and to Warsaw and to Bonn. Because I was half a Jew, a few people, Jews, were kind to me, so that I did not quite starve. And at Bonn I found, as I once told you, my saviour. For five years I worked as surely no man ever worked before—sixteen hours a day of it, with five hours for sleep, and three hours when I ran errands and did all the dirty work of the other students, to save a few pennies for food and clothing. Eating did not take up much time in those days! And the students laughed at me, and hated

me, because I was cleverer than they, because my clothes were ragged and dirty and smelt bad. Once, to attend an examination I had no clothes but a suit I had begged off a rag and bone vender who stripped them from a man who had died of cholera. Often I was ill, and sometimes I had to go without food because I was too weak to go out and beg. It was only my dreams that kept me alive; dreams of the day when my discovery should be perfected, my secret given out to the world; when I should be acclaimed as the saviour of poor, moribund humanity; when men should fear and respect me, and women love me; when I should be rich and famous, very famous and very powerful, and could stamp on those who had thrown dirt in my face. Ah——"

Antonius's face was dark and congested with the violence of his own thoughts. He was no longer recognisable as the suave, sleek professor who intrigued London society. He gestured freely, almost roughly, with his hands, his palms thrown upwards. He was no longer European; he was purely of the Orient, with its violence, its imagination, and its lust for power.

"Then my patron died and left me a little money, and I came to London and America. I was no longer starving, but I suffered. I was not wanted or helped. I was a thin, ugly youth, bearing the signs of physical privation and strain; my clothes were shabby, and I was uncouth; I talked but indifferent English. My nationality was against me. I was not British;

I was not white; I was Oriental, unclean almost. Oh, I know how your people regard mine—unless we are rich! 'Beastly Levantines.' 'Dirty dagoes.' I was not good enough for Anglo-Saxon men and women. I hated them then, though I do not hate them now. But I hugged my secret. No means was too small for my ultimate end. Here and in America I perfected myself, not only in my science, but in my person, my personality. I learnt to control my manners and my speech; I learnt to speak the European languages; I learnt how to dress; I learnt the correct way of eating, of talking, of smiling, of smoking a cigar. By sheer hard work I turned myself into a gentleman—or almost. 'A very good fellow for a foreigner.' 'Could almost be taken for an Englishman.' These and similar phrases were my triumph, though I despised the men and women who spoke them. In America, in the medical profession I made money, plenty of it, and I made friends—friends that I did not want any longer. For by now my dreams, within sight of realisation, were all the company I needed. Often I have refused pleasant invitations that I might sit at home and dream of the day when I should be master of the world, with power to give men reprieve from death, when I could give back to women life and youth and love. And now, within a few weeks or months at the outside, I shall know fulfilment. I shall have my reward——"

The harsh voice broke off suddenly, so suddenly that Joanna was conscious of a slight sense of shock.

She had forgotten the coffee and liqueurs that stood before her untasted; she had forgotten her whereabouts; she had been caught up and submerged in the great tide of violence and pent-up enthusiasm that poured like a vital stream from the man facing her. She felt as if she had been carried far down into dark places, and had suffered and striven. She had followed him through the grim phases of his struggle; she had risen with him to the ante-room of success. The face before her was no longer the dark, urbane, and yet inscrutable face that she knew; to her tense imagination it seemed that of a dark, powerful god. It fascinated and yet frightened her.

As he ceased speaking he drew a deep breath, and the red light died out of his eyes. With a hand that trembled slightly he poured a full glass of brandy and swallowed it at a gulp. Suddenly, but for the pallor of his face, he became his normal, composed self.

"Forgive me," he said. "I lost control for the moment. I have been living under a strain lately, and am over-tired. I had gone back to the days when as a poor student I ranted and raved to myself in my attic!"

Joanna passed her hand across her forehead with a quick, nervous gesture.

"Henry," she said uncertainly, "Henry, after all these years I have never really known you before."

He came round the table and took her hands.

"I believe I've frightened you," he said, and there was a soothing, almost protective note in his voice.

" Please forgive me. It was the sudden realisation of the nearness of everything." He looked her deep in the eyes. " This is the first time in all my life that I have ever cried my dreams aloud, that I have given my confidence."

" I am glad, Henry, and I value it."

" You dear—friend."

Joanna went to Scotland next day. She spent three weeks with the Stranges at their shooting-box in Inverness-shire. Except for herself and Caryl it was a man's party, most of them big-game shooters, mighty hunters of Africa; big, simple, sunburnt men who regarded an unknown continent as the Londoner regards a Mayfair drawing-room, who would rather have faced a charging rhino than a pretty woman.

" ' To kill or be killed ' is their simple maxim," said Caryl to Joanna. " So restful; so much less complex than ' Shall I shingle? ' or ' Can I stand another double? ' You are one of the few women I can stand for more than an hour on end without getting nerves. Most of the women of our crowd give one the impression of keeping a jazz band somewhere in their anatomy. By the way, talking of women, I wish you'd look up that little idiot Iris Bylaugh when you get back to London. I don't know what she has been doing, but we heard from some friends out there that she'd been turned out of her hotel at Deauville with Reggie Dean, and the next thing we heard was a cable asking Rupert for the loan of fifty pounds—

'Desperately urgent.' Someone really ought to keep an eye on her."

"Of course I will, poor kid."

Tancred Morries spent the last week with them on his way South, and he and Joanna spent long days tramping the moors, and talking on every subject under the sun.

"You are so much nicer than I ever thought you in town," she said to him one day as they lay in their butt waiting for the birds. "There one never knew what you were going to be like from one five minutes to another, and you struck me as being complex, which is an unforgivable quality in your sex, though just pardonable in ours. Up here, when you're not trying to be superior, or bored, or something, you are infinitely nicer."

"And so are you," he laughed back at her. "Instead of persistently being 'the beautiful Mrs. Fersen,' you are content to be just you, which is a great improvement."

Joanna meditatively chewed a piece of heather. "Most people are nicer in the country, I think."

"That is a compliment to 'most people,' for it is in the country that they are most really themselves."

"Yes, I suppose it is because in London, or any big city, one is always living in the previous minute, or the minute after. Life in town seems a series of disconnected incidents that few people have the artistry to join up without the crack showing."

Morries smiled reminiscently.

"I once fell in love with a woman because when she was talking to another fellow she always looked over his shoulder at me, but I fell out of love with her almost at once because when she was talking to me she looked over my shoulder at the next chap."

"Yes, and it takes an artist to talk to six men at once and make them each think that he is the one that really interests you."

"I believe you can do it, you little devil! After you went to bed last night both Saunders and old Graystone took me aside and told me you were the most intelligent woman they'd ever met."

"When a man calls a good-looking woman clever it means that she has made *him* feel clever. As I think someone has already said, we women, if we know the rules of the game, are but the mirrors in which a man sees his own perfections."

"And what are the rules of the game for us poor fools of men?"

"To make us feel, not that we are the first, or the last, or the prettiest, or the nicest woman, but that we are different from other women."

"You know a lot about it all!"

"Because I am a woman."

"And different from the others?"

"Only in so much as, though hats have different trimmings, they are all hats. All hats are different when they are new; all hats are much the same when you've worn them long enough."

"Now you're being cynical, and I hate it."

"Sorry. I'd forgotten for the moment we were not in London! Epigrams, like champagne, need electric light to make them sparkle. Let us get back to the country."

"Talking of the country, when are you coming to spend a day with me again at Carlyon?"

"Soon as you like, when I get back."

"When will that be?"

"About the end of September."

"That's a long time. You are beginning to get a habit, you know. I get restless and peevish if I don't see you for a week. It's all wrong. Not that you care, of course."

"That's not a friendly remark, Tanks."

"I don't feel friendly," he said viciously. She raised her eyebrows. "I don't know what I feel," he added. "I didn't like your remark about—hats."

"Hats?"

"People being all alike when you've known them a bit."

"Oh, yes. Well?"

"Is everyone alike to you—men, I mean?"

"A great many of them are."

"All of them? Me, for example?"

"Well, you're a friend, aren't you, Tanks? At least, I hope so. One doesn't have time to make many friends in London. Most men are just callers or partners."

"Or lovers."

"Of some women, not of me."

"Of course."

"There's no of course about it, though it happens to be true. What reason have you to suppose me different from the rest of our friends?"

"Because you *are* different, whatever cheap epigrams you may make about—hats. I should hate it if you weren't."

She was silent.

"It's rather wonderful, though. You're free, you've been a widow some time, and, apart from your looks even, you're the sort of woman that men would go crazy over. Haven't you ever loved a fellow?"

"I don't think I've ever loved anyone. I thought I loved my husband when I married him, but I was too young to know really. It wasn't a happy marriage, and he wasn't a good sort of man. And—well, there's been nobody since." She spoke rather hurriedly. She felt a sudden sense of discomfort, a keen desire to change the conversation.

"How wonderful! Poor little soul, it was a bad business about your marriage."

Her ears had caught a faint, familiar sound, and she snatched at her opportunity.

"And those grouse will be a bad business in a minute! They're coming over."

There was the whirring of strong wings above their heads, and half a dozen grouse raced the horizon unharmed.

"Damn!" He leapt to his feet, while a faint, derisive shout reached them from the next butt:

" Joanna, hold his foot and not his hand, or there'll be no dinner to-morrow ! "

She crouched down in the sweet-smelling heather, while for the next ten minutes a fusillade of shots rang over her head. She admired the elastic strength of his slim figure in its rough tweed coat, and the clean lines of the back of his head and neck. He was concentrating entirely now on the work in hand, and the effort threw out the obstinate set of his square chin, and put a steely blueness into his eyes. A lovable character, she thought, but one impossible to influence ; a temperament half fighter and half idealist. As she watched him a feeling of tenderness almost motherly went through her.

From the Stranges she went North on a couple more visits, then down to some friends in Norfolk for the early partridges. While there she received a long letter from Henry Antonius. The first part contained merely the gossip of London; the last page she re-read:

" At last the strain has lightened a bit, and the clinic is undergoing a spring cleaning. My two experiments have succeeded right up to my wildest hopes, and I have been able to take a bit of a holiday. Badly needed, too, for I was tireder than I thought. But what does it matter, for *I have succeeded* ! All next month I shall be in conference with the leading lights of the medical profession—and then ! I will tell you all about everything when we meet. I have so much to say to you that I hope it will be soon. I

have missed you very much, my dear and beautiful friend. By the way, I ran into Lord Morries the other day at Claridge's, and we spoke a little of you. Yours, HENRY ANTONIUS.

" P.S.—Morries, of course, is in love with you. Are you in love with him? "

She answered his letter by return of post, warmly congratulating him, and she told him of her return to London the following week.

" That I shall see you and one or two other friends, and be able to watch your triumphal progress, is about the only element that cheers the prospect of returning to the parrot-cage. I told you before, didn't I, that I was not cut out for Society with a capital S, and now I am convinced of it. However, I am much looking forward to seeing you. Yours, JOANNA.

" P.S.—*No!* "

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Joanna arrived in London in the early days of October the parrot-house was getting into its stride for what the society papers paternally call the Little Season. The shops were bright with colour; the restaurants full of new frocks, new scandals, and new ragtimes and women with a new coating of sunburn under their new brand of make-up. And among the well-known phalanx appeared the fresh, shy faces of new girls who were having a preliminary canter to try their paces for the season proper.

One of the first people Joanna saw was Iris Bylaugh, who dropped in late one evening calling loudly for a cocktail.

"*With* a dash," she added to the footman, as he came in with the tray. "I'm done in, done up."

"What have you been doing, you bad girl?" asked Joanna. "You look as jaded as if you'd never been out of London."

"London's a rest-cure! I tell you what, Joanna; talking about form at a glance, I knew I'd picked a winner when I made you a soppy declaration of esteem at the Mount. That was good stuff, that letter you wrote me, I'll tell the world, and as for the hundred quid, 'that is my mixture,' as an American lad said to me the other day when I kissed him. Joanna, I've

an odd way of expressing myself, but you know what I'm trying to say, and you're going to be the first creditor I ever repaid as soon as I can collect the good money Reggie Dean owes me."

"Let me be the last; probably some of the others need it more!" said Joanna, smiling. "But tell me all about everything, and what happened at Deauville."

"Oh, it's a long and murky story that I won't sully your pure ears with, but it ended in a few of us being thrown out of the Regina. Tarlton was at the bottom of it. He's a nasty bit of work, may the sewer rats choke on his bones! We'd fallen among greater blackguards than ourselves. I was an ass and Reggie was another, and it was a job to clear it all up."

"And it's all clear now?"

"Absolutely. Poor old Reggie got the worst of it."

"Reggie figures in most of your cyclones, doesn't he?"

"Yes; he's such an ass."

"Are you fond of him?"

"Not particularly. He's not as bad as some. We understand each other; we're both up against it periodically, and we lead each other by the hand."

"The blind leading the blind, what?"

"Never before sundown! And that reminds me—another, please, *with* a dash! Don't lecture me, Joanna, though you do it so prettily. Just say to yourself when you think of me: 'There, but for a bank balance, a nice disposition, and a kind of beauty

that arouses the one good instinct in a bad man, goes Joanna Fersen!' "

" God forbid that I should lecture anyone! But if you're in any sort of a bother again, make a note of my telephone number, won't you? My bank balance is better than Reggie's, anyway."

" It's a bargain, bless you. I'd kiss you if I didn't hate kissing women as much as I like kissing men. There, I've shocked you. Now tell me all the news. Where's Tanks? "

" At Carlyon, shooting partridges, when I last heard of him."

" How sweetly patriarchal! "

She chattered irrelevantly for a few minutes, and departed as suddenly as she had come, and the next Joanna heard was that she was touring the Mediterranean on the yacht of a rich Argentine.

Next evening Henry Antonius came to dine. He was looking better and less tired, and seemed in buoyant good spirits, but as he sipped his cocktail she watched him with a vague sense of puzzlement. She could not quite define the difference she noticed in him. She had known him in many phases and in many moods—as a doctor, as a friend, and as a man of the world, in moments of depression and enthusiasm, of failure and success. Always, except on the one occasion when he had spoken of his dreams, he had been bland, self-possessed, and well bred. Knowing what she did of his origin and upbringing, she had admired his powers of assimilation. He had always been, even to

a critical eye, what is termed a gentleman. Now in his manner and bearing there was a faint but perceptible coarsening; his gestures were less restrained, his manner when he addressed the footman was ever so slightly overbearing. He seemed less English, somehow, and all the little traits that had betrayed his foreign origin struck her attention forcibly. But he seemed very genuinely glad to see her.

"You don't know how I have missed you," he said, as they lingered over dinner, "how I've needed you all these trying, doubtful weeks. Though there were days when I did not see you, and often, when we did meet, it was in a world of noise and glitter, yet your presence in the same house, or in the same town even, seemed to bring something bright and gracious into a rather grim world of work and strain and worry, as flowers bring graciousness to a sick-room."

"Poor, dear Henry, I was a beast to go away, but it's all over now. Tell me all about it."

"Well, as I told you, my two experiments are successful, and I have laid my case before the big medical pots. Next week Hermann Marx is coming over himself from Leipsig to look into it, and see my experiments."

"And they are satisfied—they believe?"

"Such a buzzing, such a pow-wow, as you've never heard, my dear! Some of them believe; some of them, that don't want to believe, pretend that there's charlatanry somewhere. But they'll believe right enough before long, I can tell you. I've got all the

facts for them clear as daylight, and the details and the proofs. In a month at the outside the sceptics will be eating humble pie." His tone was loud and exultant as she had never heard it before. "Hermann Marx's verdict will do a lot towards settling their hash."

"*Et puis?*"

"*Et puis—le déluge!* I shall give it to the Press. And then you'll see! You see, my discovery upsets preconceived ideas thousands of years old. It will come up against, and throw out of gear, the law, the medical profession, and, above all, the Church. In the light of cold facts they won't know what to say; the ground is simply swept from under their feet."

"And you?"

"Oh, I've nothing to do but sit on my facts. I'm not a lawyer or a parson. And I've not finished yet, either! For you can imagine, can't you, that my discovery is only in its infancy? The renewal of life, the rejuvenation of the cellular tissues—for that is what it amounts to—has a hundred possibilities that at the moment I've only demonstrated in one way. The man who first discovered the working possibilities of electricity did not stop there. The first lighter-than-air vehicle was but the primary parent of a hundred forms of aircraft. There is no knowing at the moment how far I may not be able to carry my discovery."

Joanna leant back in her chair. Her face wrinkled in thought.

"Of course, the prospect seems illimitable. It staggers one to think of. Yet it seems almost sacrilegious, as if it supererogated the power of God. What happened to Perseus, who stole fire from heaven?"

"Oh, if you consider it from the religious point of view, isn't it as much supererogation to cure illnesses that presumably God, for some end of His own, has sent us—to restore health, in other words, as to restore youth that normally produces health? This, of course, is only one of the many things one is charging up against. And besides the Church there is, of course, the law; that will present infinitely greater and more technical complications."

"Doesn't it frighten you?"

"I exult in it!" He spoke harshly, almost roughly, and once again Joanna was half uncomfortably conscious of the subtle change that had been wrought in him.

"And your living proofs? Tell me about them. How and what is their condition and outlook?"

"A little dazed and uncertain at present. The woman, at any rate, is readjusting rapidly. The man has naturally a queer character."

"What class and sort of people are they?"

"The woman was a strong country girl of the middle classes—originally daughter of a chemist in a provincial town, I believe, with small private means of her own, whose son was killed in the war, and her husband died shortly after. She was just sixty when she came to me."

"Is she pretty?"

"Not at all, but very strong and healthy. The man, Lowell, though less physically perfect, is a far more interesting type. A student, a dreamer by nature, and an engineer by profession, he had spent his previous life trying to invent some mechanical contrivance which he believed was to revolutionise the world of machinery. Before he came to me he was in a fair way to success, and agreed—indeed begged—to take the risk of my experiment to gain the time and strength to complete it. He has an attractive personality, and, as you can imagine, his case evoked in me a sympathy of kinship that finally induced me to accept him."

"I think that case is rather a righteous one. And don't they mind the thought of the inevitable publicity?"

"The woman doesn't; indeed, so far, among the medicos, she seems rather elated at the interest she creates. Lowell is a sensitive soul, and rather shrinks from the prospect, I fancy, but means to stick to his bargain. I propose to make them acquainted with a few people at any rate to begin with, without betraying their identity. Lowell, anyway, is eminently presentable, and would even have a success at Mayfair parties, I think! But, joking apart, would you care to meet them?"

"I should like to immensely."

"All right. I'll bring them round one day, if you let me know some time when you're alone. They're

rather shy and confused among strangers at present, but they're bound to love you."

"And you—how do they regard you?"

"Lowell likes me all right in a qualified sort of way, I think. He is very British, and, even after what I've done for him, can't quite get over his national antipathy for 'dagoes!' It makes me laugh sometimes. The woman, Mrs. Newton—don't laugh, please—she—well, at the moment she is inclined to think herself in love with me."

In spite of his exhortation Joanna laughed outright.

"Poor soul!" she said. "But how funny! And she is not pretty. Poor Henry!"

"I knew you'd laugh, you little wretch." Antonius smiled, in spite of himself, though ruefully. "And it's not very flattering to me. But I'm not flattering myself either. It's not myself or my personal charm; it's—well, the poor soul—before—was unhappy and lonely after the death of her near and dear ones. She longed for youth—it's curious what store some women set on physical youth and its attributes—in the belief that youth alone could give her back happiness, the sort of happiness she'd known; and now, because it is I who have given her what she craves, she believes she loves me, with a sort of humble, slavish worship. I have tried, but without being brutal I can't disabuse her of it. I trust it will go as new real interests develop. She follows me about wherever I go, and her eyes are the eyes of a dog, and

she looks dumbly hurt if I don't notice her, or when I go away, and almost fawns on me when I return. It is really very embarrassing."

Joanna's face had become grave.

"Poor soul, I can understand her feelings; something of the feeling of the creature towards its creator. How do she and Lowell feel towards each other?"

"Indifferent and quite unsympathetic. Indeed, I am not sure that there is not a kind of mutual repulsion."

"That's curious, and a pity. It would seem a kind of artistic justice if they fell in love and married each other."

"If you'd seen them you would not say so. They are utterly different in class and mentality. His mentality is distinctly above the ordinary, hers quite definitely low. She was one of those women of the primitive, almost animal, type, who were more frequent than they are to-day, whose sole function was wifehood and motherhood. That is what gave her, I suppose, in the apparent absence of other strong reasons, such an intense physical craving for the continuance of life."

"You don't think that most people would feel it so keenly?"

"No. Not unless they have been blessed with great happiness that they blindly desire to continue. I think the majority of people become tired, lose the active impulsion of interest, the desire to renew or carry on. The exceptions are people like my two

types, who respectively have a strong physical and a strong mental hold on life."

"The outlook for him seems happier than for her. His hold on life is virtually guaranteed. What is there for her unless she marries?"

"Most women can marry if they want to sufficiently, if they are prepared to accept marriage for its own sake, without idealism."

"Supposing your Newton woman, or anyone in a similar case, should wish to marry someone who did not already know her peculiar circumstances, would it be incumbent on her to tell the man about them?"

"Why should it? No ordinary woman, before or after marriage, thinks it necessary to tell her husband all the possible medical treatments, health exercises, or even beauty specialism she has undergone to preserve herself; still less would she in a case where her health, strength, youth, and looks are absolutely genuine, when she is mentally and physically perfect, and capable of every normal function. But why do you ask?"

"I don't know. It just occurred to me."

He looked at the clock.

"Nearly midnight. I'd no idea it was so late."

"No hurry."

"I must reluctantly go. I've a long day before me to-morrow. Aren't you dancing to-night?"

"No, I'm tired of dancing. Well, if you must go, here's a stirrup-cup." She poured two drinks, and raised her glass to her lips.

" Here's to your success, Henry, and may it be, as it's bound to be, overwhelming and continuous, and may it bring you all your heart's desire."

" My heart's desire——"

His voice was abstracted, and his eyes looked beyond her, full of a sudden sombre light. He jerked back his shoulders with a little characteristic gesture. " Thank you, Joanna," he continued. " Your wishes will sweeten my success. I wish I could believe they could also bring me my heart's desire." His voice was again bland and self-possessed.

" But your success *is* your heart's desire. What heresy are you talking, Henry? "

" Is it? " He stared at her with a return of his moody expression. " Good night," he said abruptly.

Under the intent stare of his eyes she was suddenly conscious of a faint tingling of fear, though she knew not of what.

For the next few days she saw little of Antonius. She had let herself be caught up in the tide of gay life with which the little season had set in, partly for lack of anything else to do, partly to still a sense of uneasiness, of unrest, that pervaded her, that she could not define. The parrot-house had returned from its various hibernations, from Scotland, Ireland, from the French and Italian watering-places, and from the German spas, its liver, its complexion, its wardrobe, and its *joie de vivre* renewed. Every night there were dinners and theatre-parties and dance-parties, through which flitted Joanna among a host of gay-plumaged

birds. The parrot-house, with a new coat of paint, was its gayest and shrillest, yet Joanna was not amused. In the rare moments when she gave herself time to think, she told herself that she was definitely bored, worse than bored ; that she was rather unhappy.

She had seen little of Tancred Morries since her return ; in fact, she had rather avoided him. He was living at Carlyon at the moment, shooting partridges, though he frequently came up to London for the day, and by sheer force of persistence occasionally persuaded her to come out and dine and dance with him. And each occasion made her unhappier than the last. Sometimes he asked himself to tea or dinner at her house, but always she had some excuse with which to put him off. It seemed as if she were afraid to be alone with him, and at last she admitted to herself that she was.

Though she had scoffed at the time, and denied it, Antonius's suggestion in the postscript of his letter to Norfolk had sunk in. Further, it had let in light. She knew now that she was in love with Tancred Morries, and she knew, too, that he was in love with her, for he made small effort to conceal it. She knew it, and it frightened her, frightened her stupidly and unreasonably, for there was no reason at all in the world why she should not love Tancred Morries, or he her. It was, the world would say, an eminently suitable and happy arrangement. They were both young and good-looking, well to do, well bred, suited in temperament, and of much the same tastes, and

they loved each other, and yet the idea frightened her. With a cold douche of common sense she told herself that she was behaving like a fool; that she was old enough and wise enough to control her own feelings; that if on reflection she did not feel able to accept him, she could refuse his offer when it came. But common sense did not reassure her, for she knew without a doubt that when Morries proposed to her she would accept him.

Had she the right to accept him? That was the small black thought that crouched in the back of her mind, waiting to spring. She thought of the photograph that Antonius had torn up; mentally she visualised its every detail. That had been Joanna Fersen. What was Joanna Fersen now? Was she a young woman with the rich beauty of some tropical flower, or was she a withered hag, wearing a false, grimacing mask of youth and loveliness? She stood before the long mirror in her bedroom as she put the question to herself; she tried to see, behind the lovely presentment of her reflection, the dimly remembered features of the Joanna Fersen of the photograph. But she could not. She conscientiously went over in her mind the conversations bearing, however remotely, on the subject that she had had with Antonius. She reconstructed what he had said about Mrs. Newton, and a little peace came into her mind. She was no freak of artificiality; she was genuine and normal, more real than nine out of ten of the women he might marry. She had a pure, clean beauty of mind and body

with which to give royal bounty to any man, and she loved with a clear flame, a disinterested completeness that is rare in a shop-worn world. She turned away from her mirror with a sense of peace after days of agonised uncertainty and doubt.

On a sudden impulse, one morning she rang up Antonius asking him if he would bring his two patients quietly to tea with her. It was with a queer, rather frightened sense of anticipation that she awaited them. It had been agreed that for a variety of reasons the two visitors were not to be told of her knowledge of their circumstances, greatly to Joanna's relief, for it enabled her to master her nervousness, and to accept them as casual patients of his.

It was on Mrs. Newton that her interest centred with the most painful intensity. In herself the woman was not interesting; the plain, homely face, thick-set figure, and the slight West Country burr in her accent showed in her exactly for what she was, or had been—an honest country woman of no complexity. Only in the wide china-blue eyes there was a faint air of unhappiness, a vague bewilderment that only vanished as they rested on Antonius. Indeed, they seemed unable to detach themselves from him, following his every movement with a patient, fond watchfulness that was at the same time ludicrous and pathetic. It was with her that Joanna talked chiefly as she dispensed tea, and the brunt of the conversation fell on Joanna, who was subtly conscious that, though the woman showed a polite, almost deferential, readiness to

respond on any subject suggested, that she herself was making no headway, that her companion was not altogether at ease with her; indeed, that possibly she was somewhat antagonistic. This impalpable antagonism, she recognised, was merely due to the difference—so full of meaning for middle-class women—of class and breeding, of clothing even.

When presently Antonius joined in their talk, she turned to the other guest, and it was with a faint sense of surprise that she met his eyes. She was used to admiration, more than used to the admiring stares of men of all classes and conditions, but rarely had she encountered such an expression as she saw in the eyes of Lowell; an expression less of masculine sex admiration than of bewilderment, of childlike, rapt beatitude, as of an imaginative person who suddenly sees something infinitely strange and lovely, or who recalls something seen in a dream. The personality of the man himself was attractive. He looked about thirty, slim and pale, with intelligent, thoughtful brown eyes under a broad brow, and a rather shy manner. When he spoke, it was with diffidence, and a rather precise pronunciation; a sensitive man, she decided, and a dreamer; a man, though, of obstinacy and concentration. Though she felt him to be far from stupid, conversation hung fire. Lowell seemed a trifle absent-minded, as if his thoughts did not keep pace with his words, but he never took his eyes from her face, and continued to wear the same air of rapt beatitude.

Her sense of embarrassment had vanished. Afterwards, in thinking it over she realised that subconsciously she had been dreading the meeting with Antonius's two experiments, as if she feared that by some instinct they might recognise her as akin with themselves. The fear had vanished before even she had recognised it. She had been taken for granted.

Antonius lingered for a moment when the others had left the room.

"Well?" he asked.

"Henry, it's too marvellous! I didn't actually realise till I saw them with my own eyes what a marvellous thing you've done."

Antonius smiled.

"You've simply bowled poor Lowell over!" he said. "I never thought of that aspect before. Of course, it's the first time for thirty years or more that he has seen a beautiful woman through the eyes of a young man. No ordinary youth has the same sudden revelation. Poor chap, it has hit him right between the eyes! It's an interesting psychological point."

"Don't be cold-blooded, Henry." She reflected a moment. "Poor souls, I am afraid that you've taken on a bigger thing than anyone but God can negotiate."

Two days later, as she was lingering over the remains of breakfast, Tancred Morries made a beaming and unexpected entry.

"Oh, lazy one!" he said in mock reproach. "Not dressed yet? Do you know what you're in for to-day?"

"How explosive you are!" she said, and had to take herself to task for the sudden unregenerate joy that bubbled up in her. "What is it?"

"I'm going to take you down to Carlyon for the day. I don't care what your engagements are; you can put them off. I'll get you back in time for dinner. I've got to come up for a regimental dinner myself. It's the most glorious day down there, you can't imagine. Just a touch of frost in the night that has made the lawn look like diamond dust, and the bracken is bright golden, and the pheasants in the wood are chuckling like—like nightingales. They woke me up, and I just said to myself, 'Everything is perfectly good, but it needs Joanna!' I didn't give myself time for breakfast; just some porridge, a brace of eggs, and half a ham, and galloped off. And I'm terribly hungry, and may I finish your breakfast?"

"I'll send for a clean plate."

"Why, you haven't got foot-and-mouth, have you? Not that that's the right way to talk to the only lady in the world who looks lovely at breakfast! Hurry up and bath and dress. I'll give you half an hour."

"I have bathed."

He came close to her and took her by the shoulders. "I believe you have. I don't know what you put in it, but you 'niff very good. Twenty minutes, then."

She had opened her mouth to protest, but the child-like gaiety of his mood was infectious. It caught her up like the lilt of a song, and she laughed to herself as she hurried through her dressing.

Half an hour later they were on the road, the keen, sweet tang of an October morning stinging their cheeks, and setting the blood running. Half-way down Marylebone Road, Morries slowed down his car opposite a garage.

"Could do with a drop more petrol," he said. "Started off in such a hurry this morning that I forgot to fill up. Do you mind waiting a minute?"

"Of course, and you might buy me a *Daily Mail* from the stand there to fill in time. I haven't seen the papers to-day."

"Righto."

When he had disappeared into the garage she opened the paper. A big black headline at the top of the leading page caught her sudden attention:

"STAGGERING SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY.

"THE ELIXIR OF LIFE?

"HERMANN MARX SAYS YES.

"*Well-known Professor's Sensational Invention.*

"It is affirmed on the soundest authority—in fact, no less than that of Professor Hermann Marx, the world-famous expert on bacteriology—that a process has been discovered by which the seventy-year-old organism of a man or a woman can be restored to its fullest degree of youthful vigour; in other words, that the old can be made young again. The process, details of which are still under the seal of strict professional secrecy, is the discovery of

Professor Henry Achmed Antonius, of Syrian origin, who for many years has been renowned in Sydney, Australia, and in various European and American capitals, as an expert on women's diseases, and is a well-known and popular figure of London society. (Photo on back page.) Up to the moment of going to press, Professor Antonius has declined to give any details of his discovery, but it is understood that the medical profession, after careful study, has given it the sanction of its approval. If his claim be true, it opens up a field for scientific speculation and research that surpasses the wildest dreams of man."

Joanna re-read the paragraph carefully.

"So the parrot-house has spoken," she said to herself, as she stuffed the paper into the pocket of her fur coat.

CHAPTER IX

MORRIES and Joanna reached Carlyon in time for lunch, and Joanna was again vividly struck with the beauty of the place. It had the gift, as only Elizabethan houses seem to have, of changing its aspect according to the weather or the light, as a lovely woman may change her aspect, ever gaining charm. Something of this Joanna said to Morries.

"Last time I saw Carlyon in June, it was all pearly, like the inside of a shell; now it is mellow and golden like a wonderful sunset. Since you last brought me here I have stayed in a quantity of English country houses, and Scotch ones, some of them imposing, and some of them really beautiful, but I have never known one as intimate and lovable as Carlyon. It seems to have a definite personality, a beautiful soul of its own."

Morries looked gravely pleased, as he always did when Joanna praised Carlyon. To him also the place had always seemed to possess a personal entity that was at one with him, and he thought it wonderful that Joanna should have felt the same.

After lunch they took a long walk through the shrubberies and park. Most of all she loved the place vaguely called the "grounds," a maze of broad grass walks bordered with a tangle of laurel and creepers, where unexpectedly peered out the moss-grown statues

of mythological creatures—of shaggy goat-men wearing laurel wreaths, of tall Greek gods, and the slim figures of nymphs.

"The home of Pan himself! Can't you imagine it on moonless nights, when they come to life, and laugh and make love, to stifle their homesick longing for the green fields of Arcady? It was love and not ambition that made your place, Tanks. So many English gardens give me a sense of oppression, as if some live thing were being mown, and weeded, and planted, and tidied to death. Here the spirit of the earth is allowed to live."

Morries, in whom a natural imagination had been stifled by conventional training, loved these sudden flights that Joanna's fancy sometimes took. Down by the lake, under the shadow of a broad beech, they sat and rested. They sat so still that the wild things forgot their presence; the fallow deer grazed placidly near, and the water-fowl chattered and grubbed for insects almost at their feet.

"A dream day," murmured Morries, as he idly cracked one beech-nut against the other. She smiled at him in lazy content.

"And, like all dream days, must come to an end."

"Yes, worse luck. All good things come to an end in the smell of petrol, the roar of traffic, noise and food, and the voice of the parrot-house."

"The parrot-house?"

She explained, and he laughed.

"Poor old parrot-house! Why does one endure it, I wonder? And yet it's good fun at times."

"Yes, I think I can bear it for another month or two."

"Why a month or two?"

"Because I don't think I shall like it in the winter, when the window is shut. We had the first fog last week, and it sent me rushing round to Cook's to ask where they had a good line in sunshine."

"Why, are you going abroad?"

"I expect so, round about Christmas."

"Where will you go?"

"I can't make up my mind. Switzerland is too cold, Egypt too hot, the East too English, the Riviera too Jewish! I may try Biarritz."

"That's a long way off." Morries was cracking beech-nuts now in rapid succession, with a moody expression.

"Aren't you going abroad?"

"No, there's the shooting here. I have asked some people for it, and then there's hunting of a sort. Do you hunt?"

"No. I can ride, but I've never hunted."

"I'll teach you."

"What about Biarritz?"

"Don't go."

"How simple! But I've let my house from the New Year."

"Come here."

She laughed.

"And what would the parrot-house say?"

He sat up and took a deep breath.

"That you're the prettiest bride that's ever been brought to Carlyon."

"Tanks, don't blather. Be helpful, and tell me whether the nicest sun is to be found in Algiers, or Algeciras, or Nice, or——"

Morries interrupted her.

"What's the use of putting me off, Joanna?" he said quietly. "You know it's got to be done, if not to-day, then to-morrow, or the day after, or next week."

"Wh—what?" she stammered, as if suddenly panic-stricken. Then she took a long breath, and gathered together her composure. "Has it, Tanks?" she answered, as gravely as he had spoken.

"Of course it has. It's inevitable. It's just one of those things that was meant to be from the beginning of the world. If I was a religious chap, I'd say that God had decreed it." He rolled a little closer, and took her hand, looking down gravely at it as he spoke.

"I don't want to hustle you, my dear," he said, "but you take precious good care that I don't see much of you in London, and now's my only chance. And also, I've known all along that it was here, at Carlyon, only, that I must sooner or later ask you to marry me. You know that I love you, don't you? I've got it badly. It's been growing a long time. At first I thought you were just one of the many pretty women one meets in town, only prettier than most, but then, little by little, in all sorts of ways, I got to know

you, and to know that you're the only woman in the world that I could ever marry, and that if I don't marry you I shall never marry at all. You know that I'm not an impulsive sort of chap, and that I'm not exaggerating. And I think you like me a little bit, don't you? "

He looked at her intently, till she nodded unwillingly.

" If it's only a little it'll do for me to go on with, till I can make it a lot. And I can, I know it, if you'll only give me a chance. We've much the same ideas; we like the same things. You don't care for the parrot-house, and nor do I. I've hated to see you wasting yourself in it. You're too good for it. I've longed to carry you away from it all. Why should we be bothered with it? Why shouldn't we be happy in our own way? You see, I'm trying to be reasonable and calm, but I haven't even begun to say that ' Oh, Joanna, I love you so, that I love you better than anything in the world, more than I knew anyone could love.' " He buried his face in her lap, and his voice was husky. " I adore you—I worship you, Joanna ! "

With a little unconsidered gesture she stroked his curly hair, but quickly withdrew her hand, as he seized it and covered it with kisses.

" But, Tanks, I don't want to marry. At any rate, not for a long time."

" Nor did I till I fell in love with you ! And you've got to fall in love with me—*got* to, do you hear? " He raised himself and shook her gently by the shoulders. " Oh, Joanna, darling sweetheart, how can I make you

understand how much I love you, so that it hurts, and yet I wouldn't exchange the hurt for anything in the world? It's the most wonderful feeling in the world, and you've got to have it too. I'll make you! Joanna, just think of you and me at Carlyon, with no one to bother about us, or we about them; to see you about the place; to know that you love it as I do, and that it belonged to you, and that you belonged to me. It just makes me dizzy to think of. Thinking about it has been driving me mad for weeks. Oh, Joanna, don't kill me by inches. Do say something!" He had put his arms round her, talking into her ear, and trying to draw her face to his. She broke away from him.

"Oh, Tanks, don't. I can't think."

"I don't want you to think. I only want you to say you love me. I want to hear you say it. Because I'll swear that you do a little bit."

"I *must* think. Listen, Tanks, this is all wrong. You oughtn't to think of marrying me. I'm—I'm not very young. I'm a widow, and you ought to marry a young girl."

"Listen to her—not very young! You—you're a child compared with most of us. That's one of the things I love you for, because you're sweet and fresh, and different from all the other damned women. Because you're real and alive and genuine and true; just your beautiful self in mind and body. Because you'd be a real wife, not just a mistress or a doll. Because you belong here. Because you were just made for it, and it for you. You know, I thought that to

myself when I first saw you here—do you remember, when you were looking at the pictures in the hall? I just knew that you belonged to Carlyon and me. You reminded me of one of the little princesses you talked of, do you remember? That's what you've always seemed to me since, a fairy princess who belonged to us, Carlyon and me. Why, Joanna, what's the matter?"

She had turned away her face and buried it in her hands. He pulled them gently away.

"Why, you're crying! Sweetheart, dear one, what have I said? How have I hurt you? Don't, for God's love!" He was covering her tear-stained hands with kisses.

"Tanks, don't!"

"Don't what, my darling?"

"Tanks——" She was crying openly now, in little choking sobs like a child. Before she could make a move to stop him he had bent towards her and kissed her on her wet cheek. Suddenly she stopped crying, gasped a little, and looked him deeply in the eyes.

"Joanna!" he said breathlessly.

"Tanks!" Her voice came in a whisper.

"Then you do?"

"I don't want to, but I do."

"And you will?"

"Yes."

"Oh, thank God!" His tone was almost awe-struck. Holding her gently, almost as if afraid, he kissed her on the forehead, then held her from him,

and looked her deep in the eyes. Then he gathered her up in his arms, and kissed her till the world rocked round her.

Almost in silence they drove back to London. Sometimes they turned to look at each other, and in their eyes was a beatitude past words. The lights of London brought them back to earth.

"Damn this regimental dinner!" he said.

"Yes, damn it! Are you going on to Marian Stanley's party?"

"Not a hope. You going?"

"I don't want to. But I can't stop alone at home to-night. I'm too happy."

"Darling! But in a way I'm glad I can't go. I don't want to see you in a crowd. I just want to carry away with me, and sleep on, the memory of you and me alone at Carlyon."

He held her hand lingeringly on the doorstep of the Knightsbridge house.

"Lunch to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Joanna!"

"Tanks!"

She took her solitary dinner in a state of beatific bewilderment, wrapt in a mantle of unreasoning happiness as in a garment. All her uncertainty, her doubts, her mental anguish, had left her; she knew nothing, was conscious of nothing, but the fact that she was happy—overwhelmingly happy. She felt a vague annoyance that she had to go to Lady Marian's

party. She wanted to be alone, to drench herself in happiness. But the evening's guest of honour was Henry Antonius, and it would be unfriendly not to be near him in his hour of triumph. She wondered, as she ran down the steps to her car, whether the radiance of the face she had just seen in her mirror would betray her to the world. It had been agreed between Tancred and herself that their engagement should not be announced till they had heard from the Dowager Lady Morries, who was wintering in Algeria.

Though scarcely ten o'clock, the narrow hall of Lady Marian's little house in Cheney Row was packed sardine-wise. The lady had let it be known that Professor Antonius would come in for a few minutes, and all London had forgathered, those who knew him to congratulate, and to preen themselves on their social flair; those who did not, to stare at the hero of the evening papers.

Upstairs in the drawing-room an anæmic soprano sang in vain to a handful of inattentive, chattering people. Speculation and comment were rife.

"My dear, did you ever hear anything so *marvellous*." . . . "I wonder if it's *true*." . . . "One knows a few people who could *do* with his treatment!" . . . "Oh, I met him years ago in New York." . . . "Is it glands?" . . . "A kind of vivisection, I believe." . . . "They say he has got a harem in Damascus." . . . "Or wherever he comes from." . . . "Or is it in Regent's Park? He's awfully attractive, Kitty says."

. . . "*She* ought to know." . . . "Isn't he an Indian or something?"

Joanna, who was known to be a friend of Antonius, came in for a fusillade of questions.

"Joanna dear, *why* didn't you tell us? Didn't know? I don't believe you; you're a sly puss." . . . "Tell me, is he really terribly attractive and immoral?" . . . "Have you seen the experiments the *Standard* spoke of?" . . . "Do be a dear and bring him to my concert on Tuesday." . . . "Do tell us who he really is." . . .

The whisper went round that Antonius had arrived, and was in the supper-room. There was a stampede for the stairs, leaving the last notes of the ruffled soprano trickling through a room full of empty gilt chairs. In the supper-room, ten minutes later, Joanna came upon Antonius drinking champagne, surrounded by a jostling mob of women who tried to force themselves on his attention. In rapid succession Lady Marian was effecting introductions, which he acknowledged with a florid courtesy. Once more, as she approached him, Joanna was struck a trifle unpleasantly by the new, overbearing force of his personality, and the foreignness of his appearance. His smile took on a quieter quality as she came up to him, and he turned his back on the crowd of women while he made room for her in the corner by the buffet.

"This is good of you," he said. "I know you hate these shows. Champagne?"

"Thank you. Henry, you must be sick of the obvious by now, but is it presumptuous of me to say that I am proud of you?"

"That's my supreme triumph," he said, and the intensity of his voice gave reality to the exaggeration of his words.

"Can I see you soon without all this mob?" he asked, as she sipped her champagne. "It seems an age since I've really seen anything of you."

"Of course. Just ring up when you have a spare minute."

"Well," she said, a few minutes later, "I only came in just to have a glimpse of your triumph. Now I'm going to throw you to the crowd, and slip quietly into the night."

She smiled at him, and something in the secret radiance of her face caught his attention.

"What has happened to you to-night?" he asked. "You look transcendental."

"Do I?" she said almost absently, as she held out her hand in good-bye. Then she looked at him as if an idea had occurred to her. "Henry, do you remember what I said to you once, and that I repeat now—that I could almost kneel down and worship you?"

The words might have been taken as a form of the exaggerated homage that was overwhelming Antonius to-night, but something in the significance of the tone in which they were uttered made him look at her.

"What do you mean?" he asked. She smiled

elusively. "What do you mean?" he repeated sharply.

She did not answer, but a note of harshness in his voice, a note of something that she could not define, sent a faint feeling of incomprehensible fear through her as she slipped through the crowd to her car.

CHAPTER X

THE fame of Henry Antonius grew by leaps and bounds. He and his discovery were almost the only topics discussed in the parrot-house, or elsewhere. At first his discovery was considered merely in the light of a freak, an advertising "stunt," and Antonius himself was lightly dismissed as an enterprising quack. Then, as Hermann Marx and other scientists almost as world-famous appeared to take him seriously, the general public and the Press began to take him seriously too. His photograph appeared in every daily and weekly paper, accompanied by long interviews singularly devoid of information and all bearing a cousinly resemblance. A dozen biographies of his life appeared in as many magazines, so widely differing in detail that it would appear that he had more lives than the proverbial cat. Apart from his professional correspondence, two secretaries had to be engaged at the Regent's Park house to deal with the avalanche of letters that arrived by every post. In a week his fame had crossed oceans, and in hundreds and thousands of homes, in every part of the globe, his discovery was considered and discussed in all its bearings by a diversity of men and women to whom, each in their different way, it conjured up strange, vast possibilities.

For every adult it had some message; for old men whose life's work lay yet uncompleted; for old women who craved youth, or feared it; for younger women who brooded over the first grey streak on their temples; for younger men who deplored a lessening of strength and vigour. To some he appeared as a god, to others as a Mephistopheles; to some his name spelt hope, to others fear; and countless numbers it set dreaming. Only the very young could afford to laugh at Antonius and his pretensions.

And hot on the trail of the general public came the law and the Church—especially the Church. The law, being cautious, scoffed and bided its time; the Church was bitter in its denunciation. It pointed to Antonius as a false prophet, as an impious charlatan, as the anti-Christ himself, who, tricking poor, weak humanity for his own ends, arrogated to himself the power of God. For lesser impiety, they cried, had a great angel lost his place in heaven, had necromancers been put to the torture, and old women burnt as witches. It appealed to all and sundry of the Christian Church Catholic throughout the world, of whatever denomination, to rise up and cast out the impostor, who sought to shake the foundations of their faith, and plunge the world into unnatural chaos. Some of its units merged indignation in alarm, and the emissaries of great dignitaries came personally, to plead, to the house in Regent's Park. The Church ran a duet with the world of science, who merged a thousand petty

jealousies in a growing belief and took a reflected glory in Antonius's triumph.

The mind of the parrot-house ran riot, and deified Antonius for the new sensation he had given it. In the season, maybe, Antonius might have played second fiddle to the Derby winner, to the new operatic prima donna, or the handsome tennis champion. But in the autumn, when life was generally so flat and devoid of titillation! Not knowing what better to do to show its gratitude, it would have gorged him with food and music, and with adulation. For him the social footlights worked overtime; he was the star turn at every function where he showed himself—so much so that various deposed princes and Sunday-newspaper celebrities, who had been looking forward to their share of the Little Season's limelight, retired in disgust to foreign or surburban *villeggiatura*.

Of the professional drama of Antonius's life the general public heard little, for he maintained a great reticence thereon, but through the parrot-house, during those hours he could spare, he moved with the lustre of a planet. Some people are submerged by a great light; he positively glittered in it. More and more Joanna noted the progress of the subtle alteration that had developed in him since he had come to London. His manners had become more elaborate, almost florid; had lost their deliberately acquired Anglo-Saxon poise and reserve. No one now could possibly have taken him for an Englishman. He made no secret of the satisfaction and self-pride that his success

gave him, and accepted adulation as his due. Watching him, she was sometimes reminded of an Oriental potentate she had once seen receiving the homage of some prisoners of war. She reflected that it was like watching a mask slowly, very slowly, drop from a well-known face. Rupert Strange confirmed her impression even more forcibly at a dinner-party one night.

"They say that success makes or mars a man," he said. "Look at Antonius. He used to be a very decent, unassuming sort of chap, and quite presentable. Now all the Asiatic in him is coming out—all its pomp and pride. He plays with all these fools as a tiger plays with a kid, rolling and purring and throwing the dust up."

Joanna, with a quick instinct of loyalty, smothered a sudden realisation that Antonius was a trifle vulgar. She saw but little of him in private these days, for he was excessively busy, putting in an amount of work to exhaust any ordinary man.

She herself was rather at a loose end. Tancred Morries was away in the North, fulfilling some long-standing shooting engagements, and she was lonely without him, and restless. To shorten her solitude she went out a good deal, and everywhere she met Antonius, who showed an almost exaggerated delight at seeing her. Once he had suggested a quiet dinner *tête-à-tête* at his house, which she had accepted, but at the last minute a formal dinner of the scientific world, to honour the departure of Hermann Marx,

had forced him to postpone it, and she had been rather shamefacedly conscious of relief. For of Antonius nowadays, though she would not admit it, she was half afraid, though she could not have said why. For some unexplained reason the frank pleasure of their old comradeship seemed somehow to have changed. The physical nearness of him when they met in a crowd gave her a vague sense of oppression. She felt that she no longer understood him, that some inimical element had entered into their relationship. She was more than once reminded of Rupert Strange's simile of the tiger. She happened to catch sight of his hands one evening as they lay on the dinner-table before him, and wondered why she had never noticed them before. They were hands, she thought, of which one might become afraid ; there was a hint of violence in their fleshy yet fine lines, there was something predatory in the way they held things. Tancred Morries was due to return to London early the following week, and the thought of the empty intervening days filled her with a feeling of nervous impatience.

She was surprised at the capacity for love that had sprung up in her. It bewildered and blinded her. Most attractive women, accustomed to the tentatives of men, come to love gradually, as a General achieves victory after a series of petty skirmishes. They have run the gamut of a score of petty emotions that, if they do not touch upon the fringe of love, at least skim over the sentiment and the senses, and often in

these petty skirmishes have lost the final flavour of victory; for it were idle to pretend that a woman, even though she be not a philanderer or a flirt, is utterly unscorched with the flame of desire she arouses in men. At any rate, she has something upon which to make comparison and calculation. It was not so with Joanna, to whom, by nature both passionate and tender, love had come at the age of thirty unheralded and unimagined; for, though she had spent almost two years of her new life in the world of men, she had been like a child to whom the world is one vast unknown, whose attention is attracted by everything and retained by nothing. It had been left to Tancred Morries, a most ordinary young Englishman, to arouse an almost unprecedented emotion—such an emotion as Venus, the mother of love, must have experienced when she rose full grown and yet newborn from the foam. Morries to her was not, as to most women, just a man she had chosen from a host who had played on her emotions, but the one man who had discovered to her her womanhood. She had long since forgotten her scruples and her doubts. Nothing seemed to matter but her love. She had forgotten the existence of everything else.

On the day of Morries's return Lowell came in to tea. In a friendly but casual manner she had given to him and Mrs. Newton an open invitation to come in whenever they liked, and to look upon her house as the house of a friend. Eventually they had both

called, but it had evidently been at Lowell's instigation, seconded perhaps by Antonius, for Mrs. Newton had scarcely opened her mouth throughout the visit, and then only at the mention of Antonius's name. She had sat silent, furtively regarding Joanna and the room they sat in, and Joanna had received the impression that the woman rather disliked her; but she was not unused to the instinctive mistrust that some women have of a woman better looking and better dressed than themselves, and had thought no more of it. Lowell had called once or twice. On the second occasion, when she had been entertaining a few friends to tea, he had seemed shy and nervous, but that had worn off, and in time he adapted himself with a certain diffidence that was not unattractive. At no time did he talk very much, leaving the brunt of the conversation to her, and once or twice she had surprised on his face the expression of blank bewilderment it had worn at their first meeting.

On this occasion he expressed his pleasure in finding her alone. Until tea was finished they had talked rather stiltedly on impersonal topics. When the footman had cleared away the tea-things, and departed, Lowell got up from his chair and fidgeted restlessly about the room. Then, reseating himself opposite her, he said awkwardly:

"Yes, I'm glad I found you alone to-day, because I'm afraid this is in the nature of a good-bye."

"Good-bye? Why? Are you going away?"

"No." He hesitated, and seemed to pronounce

his words with difficulty. "I suppose, of course, that the Professor has told you about—us?"

"About——?" Joanna hesitated awkwardly.

"Well, that Jane Newton and I are—his 'experiments.'"

"Yes," said Joanna gently, after a pause. "Do you mind that he has?"

"No—not to you. But soon he is going to show us to people—people in general, I mean."

"So soon?"

"Quite soon, I think. Things have gone faster than he anticipated, and people want proof."

"I'm sorry," said Joanna sympathetically.

"That's nice of you. But it's in the bargain. Besides, of course, he has got to, otherwise what's the use of—us? When one thinks what one owes him one oughtn't to mind."

"But you do mind, of course." Joanna could not keep the pity out of her voice.

"Yes, I do, at least—horribly. I don't mind admitting it to you, though you needn't mention it to Antonius. Could one help but mind it? Not some people—not you, for example; in fact, I am glad that you know. But some of them—society people especially. No offence to your friends, but I mind them most. They're rather greedy, aren't they? Can't you imagine it? Oh, I shall be asked out to dinner, and everyone will be awfully nice to me, and ask me questions. I have been asked to dine, I believe, several times already, through Antonius. One—do

you know her—a Mrs. Cornelius Smythe?—said she was 'just crazy to meet me.' That was what I meant when I said to-day might be a sort of good-bye. I've got to be exhibited, and I've got used to the idea, but I don't want to be exhibited here in your house, with your kind eyes looking on. Do you understand? And there will be newspaper reporters; a lot have tried to butt into the clinic, though they don't know me by name or sight, and two tried to bribe the man at the door—and there'll be women trying to be nice. All those eyes—some inquisitive, some sneering, a few, perhaps, pitying—those will be the worst—and all staring and wondering. Personally, I'd much rather be exhibited in a village booth in a strolling fair. They wouldn't stare so. One wouldn't seem such a freak to them as the Fat Lady or the Ape-Faced Man from Borneo." There was a patient bitterness in Lowell's voice that wrung Joanna's heart.

"Don't!" she cried. "Don't torture yourself. Perhaps it won't be so bad."

"It'll be worse. And when that part is over, and London and New York and Paris are tired of me, will there be a corner of the world where I can hide and be unknown—be accepted and ignored as a man, and not a monstrosity?"

"I know, I know." A feeling almost akin to panic ran through Joanna. "But—but think of the youth, the youth and strength to do things, that you've been given. Won't that compensate?"

" To me, I don't know ; to some it might. But I know that I was happier before, with three or four—perhaps, with luck, five or six—normal years to run before a quiet and normal death. Then at least I didn't want things."

" You want things badly now ? "

" Yes. I'm a human being, worse luck."

" But the work that you've spoken of—your life's work to be completed—doesn't that give you something to hope and live for ? "

" That's the worst of it. I'm afraid it doesn't."

" Poor friend ! I think you're going through your worst moment now. You're dreading things. Later, I think, I am convinced, you'll find compensations."

He was looking at her with the old rapt expression, but now the bewilderment of it was gone. He passed his hand across his eyes, and stood up.

" I'm sorry I've whined," he said. " It's the first time I've said to anyone what I felt. You're right, of course ; this is just a bad moment, waiting. And the first relief already is you. It's been a relief to talk to you."

" Do you mean that ? I hope so. I should like to feel I could help in some way."

" You have."

" I'm glad. Listen. If there's ever anything I can do at any time, remember I want to."

" You mean it ? "

" Sincerely."

" Thank you." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. " Did you mind my doing that? " The twisted bitterness of his smile returned. " You're the first person who has treated me like a normal human being, and I forgot for a moment that I wasn't. Sorry." He broke off apologetically as she raised her finger in warning. " You're right, it was idiotic of me. Thank you for being a compensation." He stared at her vaguely for a moment. " The lion and the mouse," he murmured. " Here it hits me again, but by treating me like a normal person you've turned me into one. I'm going now, and I don't know when I shall see you like this again. If it's ever any use to you, well, you have a slave. Don't forget."

" Thank you, I shan't forget," she said gravely.

" I meant to tell you," he added, as they reached the door, " that Jane Newton hates you."

" Poor soul, does she? Why? "

" I don't know. Can't you imagine, perhaps? She, too, is not too happy. I don't want to speak ill of a fellow-victim, nor would I to anyone but you, but she has a vindictive nature, and I think would do you or anyone she disliked a harm. So remember."

" If she only knew how I'd like to be a friend if she'd let me. But you look serious. Why should she, or how could she, do me a harm? "

" I can't imagine. It was just a sudden feeling

of mine, that's all. Probably I'm wrong. Good-bye, and God bless you."

The thought of Lowell haunted her while she dressed for dinner, spoiling even some of her pleasure in the immediate prospect of seeing Morries. She felt a profound sympathy for the sensitive, highly-strung soul forced to be exhibited before a prying, Argus-eyed world as a "stunt," a freak of science; as the successful experiment of another man's brain. Jane Newton didn't mind so much, he had said. Anyhow, it was worse for a man than for a woman. It was an indignity on his manhood, and would follow him more doggedly through life. She thought of asking Antonius to spare him, but knew that nothing could now stop Antonius from his blazed trail of glory. She selected at random and without interest one of the frocks that her maid laid out for her choice. A faint sense of uneasiness that was something akin to fear pervaded her. She shivered slightly as she dusted a little powder over her neck and arms, and took up her scent-spray.

"Someone is walking over my grave," she said to herself, with a wry smile.

Then the maid announced that Lord Morries was waiting downstairs in the drawing-room, and straightway she forgot everything else. The outside world, with its troubles and complexities, was blotted out in a great rush of happiness as she fled into his arms for his greeting kiss. Once in a woman's life can the

rapture of love obsess her to the exclusion of everything else, and perhaps no man, from the troubled waters of his so-called experience, when he inspires it, fully realises his luck and his responsibility. To man a happy love is an adventure, to woman a homecoming.

Later in the evening Morries listened to Joanna, while she told him the news and gossip of the day. When she spoke of the Antonius affair and of Lowell's visit, he frowned a little.

"I know the fellow is an old friend of yours and all that," he said, "but need you mix yourself up too much with this business of his?"

"I don't. But poor Lowell has nothing to do with it. I'm sorry for him."

"That's his concern, poor beggar. He needn't have gone in for it. I'm not saying anything against Antonius, but I haven't much use for this show of his. It's all wrong."

"Why? It's the most wonderful scientific discovery of the century, of the history of man perhaps." Joanna was speaking half to convince herself.

"It's—how can one express it?—it's unnatural, it's uncanny. Science is all very well, but we weren't meant to mix ourselves up with what's beyond us. It's tinkering with the powers of life and death, and no one but the Almighty has a right to do that."

"I expect much the same was said of any other great

invention—electricity, radium, and the rest. You're a little archaic, Tanks."

" Maybe. As for scientists, it's their job, I suppose, and they're all right in going on with it. But what's the matter with being archaic? The world has been archaic for a good many million years, and it didn't seem any the worse for it ; in fact, rather better than in these muddled days, when no one is satisfied, and damned few people happy. Did you see the Archbishop's thing in the *Spectator* calling Antonius the Anti-Christ? I'm not sure that he is not right. And Lowell and the woman—what's her name?—they're all pretty beastly."

" Or pretty wonderful." But Joanna shivered a little.

" Oh, I suppose so in a way, but one doesn't know, so why mix oneself up in it? Don't look so serious, Joanna ; it makes you look so lovely that I can't bear it. What's it all got to do with us, anyway? What's important is whether you know what it's like to love anyone as much as I love you. What are you laughing at, Sweetheart? " He was sitting at her feet, his head resting against her knees, and she was looking down at him with that loving yet whimsical smile that comes into a woman's face when a man talks about love. The artist must have been talking of love when he painted the Mona Lisa.

" Kiss me, Joanna, or I shan't believe you love me. . . . That's better ! You really do? "

" I really do. And do you? "

" I'll prove it." His voice was smothered against the scented mass of her hair.

" For ever and ever ? " In her voice was the eternal woman's wistful catching at security.

" For ever and ever, amen ! "

CHAPTER XI

MORRIES burst jubilantly into her house one afternoon about a week later. So as to be able to see her more often, he had temporarily abandoned Carlyon, and installed himself in rooms in Jermyn Street.

"I've just had this, and thought you'd like to see it. Mother's delighted, bless her."

"This" was a letter from the Dowager Lady Morries in Algiers.

"MY VERY DEAR BOY," she wrote, "I am delighted to hear of your engagement, and much do I appreciate your thoughtfulness in telling me before you made a public announcement. Though I have hesitated to urge you, for quite a long time I have hoped that you would soon bring a bride home to Carlyon. You have always been a good boy, with a wise judgment as well as a loving heart, and for that, even more than the eulogies that I have heard about her from various friends out here, I know that your fiancée—will she allow me so soon to call her Joanna?—is just such a bride as I would have chosen for you. Already I love her for making you happy, and am looking forward, as soon as the wretched English winter lets me, to loving her for her own sake. I have seen from pictures in the

papers how beautiful she is. You say you would like to be married very soon, and, as you can imagine, I am all impatience to see you both. As Mahomet can't come to the mountain, will not the mountain come to Mahomet? Couldn't you come out to this lovely climate for your honeymoon, if you can spare a few days to an old woman who longs to see your happiness with her own eyes? Bless you, my dearest little boy, and all my tenderest messages to Joanna. Your loving MOTHER."

"What a dear letter," said Joanna, "and how darling of her to have taken me so adorably for granted."

"She knows when the Morries family is in luck, bless her," he said grandiloquently. "By Jove, if she's so pleased already, when she sees you she'll throw a fit with joy. The Algiers idea is not a bad one. What do you say to it?"

"It sounds perfect."

"Then that's that. I'll go to Cook's about tickets. What are you laughing at? By Jove, of course, we must get married first. How soon can you do it? Next week?"

"My dear boy! What about the first week in January?"

"Can't possibly wait so long. Next week, or the week after at the outside." He tried to drown her protesting arguments with kisses, till finally they compromised on precisely a month from that day. He

was riotously jubilant as he went off to change for dinner.

" See you at Claridge's at eight. I'll have everything organised to a hair by then."

As Joanna was preparing to go up to her room, Iris Bylaugh was announced. She looked better in health, sunburnt and plumper, and an expression slightly hard and more than slightly devil-may-care had replaced the former hunted look in her eyes.

" Hullo, my dear. Just off to dress? I won't linger. May I help myself? "

" No hurry. I'm awfully glad to see you, Iris, but where have you sprung from? I thought you were in the Mediterranean."

" Got back this morning, and thought I must drop in and congratulate you."

" Congratulate me? "

" Yes, ostrich! Heard all about it from the Dowager, whom I ran into at Algiers. By the way, she is fit to bust with joy that it isn't me; almost indecent, it was! And it was corroborated by the expression on Tanks's face, who nearly tripped over me without seeing me on your steps just now, looking positively soppy with happiness. Bless you, my children."

" You're the first person over here to know, Iris, and I'm so glad."

" No need to ask if you're pleased with yourself. You look nearly as soppy as Tanks."

She sipped her cocktail thoughtfully. " I've always wondered who Tanks would marry if he didn't marry

me out of sheer weakness of mind, and of all the women I know I couldn't have picked a better one than you. You'll be an overwhelming success. You'll be thoroughly 'County,' and become very prosy and dull, and rather fat in a good-looking, dignified kind of way, and have twins per annum, and be blissfully happy. Bless you, I say." She helped herself to another cocktail, and, having swallowed it in a slow, careful draught, made for the door. "Now you must make yourself beautiful for dinner. Tanks, of course? Give him my salaams. Don't bother to come down. I've got a tip for the Cambridgeshire to give your flunkey in the hall, and it embarrasses him in front of you. . . . I think I shall marry Reggie Dean myself," she called up casually as she drifted down the stairs. "He's such an ass, he deserves it."

"I wonder if she cares," thought Joanna, half remorsefully, as she dressed. She spoke of Iris as she dined with Morries at Claridge's.

"Not a bad kid," he commented. "She and Dean might hit it off all right, though I don't know what they'll live on."

"Can't we help them somehow?"

"I don't quite know how, apart from lending them money occasionally to entertain their bailiffs." Morries was not particularly interested. He was far too preoccupied over an announcement he drafted out for the *Morning Post* and *The Times*.

"I 'phoned them, but it was too late for to-morrow,"

he said. "They swore they'd have it in the day after."

Next day Morries motored down to Carlyon to make his announcement to the people there. It would please them to be told in person before they read the accounts in the papers. Joanna, with an empty day in front of her, took the occasion to go to tea with Henry Antonius. Several times lately he had telephoned, but, begrudging every hour spent away from Morries, always she had some excuse with which to put him off. Besides, for some unexplained reason she was not at ease with Antonius these days. To-day she reproached herself for unfriendliness and selfishness when she heard the gladness in Antonius's voice over the telephone as she invited herself to tea.

The feeling of uneasiness returned as she was shown into the big sitting-room whose long windows looked out on to a broad strip of garden. The day was cold and foggy, and a big fire blazed in the grate, making the room almost uncomfortably hot. It must have burnt some kind of aromatic wood, for the room was heavy with a sweet, pungent scent. Antonius did not look well, she thought. He had grown appreciably stouter in the last few months, almost ponderous, and from an indoor life his face had become sallow, rather puffy, and there were dark shadows under his eyes that seemed too large and too bright, as if they burnt with fever. He gave her the impression of being under a strain of taut nerves, of some prolonged and pent-up

excitement. He had been working too hard and sleeping too little, was suffering the reaction of his sensational success.

He greeted her with pleasure, and installed her in the most comfortable chair. She noticed that he had remembered to provide her favourite brand of tea, and the little sugared cakes she preferred. They talked throughout the meal of the warfare he had waged with the medical profession for recognition, and of his controversies with all those who, from fear, jealousy, or conviction, sought to decry him. He told her stories—poignant stories, some of them—of the poor, tormented folk who had come to him, begging for what they believed their salvation ; men who cried as Faust had cried to win a tragic love, or to bring some cherished dream to fruition ; women who wanted the beauty of their youth for revenge or vanity or power, or to regain a lost husband or lover ; parents who needed strength to support their children ; poor, suffering men and women to whom old age was tragedy. He showed her, too, his arrangements for improving and enlarging the clinic, whose windows they could see at the bottom of the garden, for the time, soon after the New Year, when he should begin practical work. He had two patients there already, he said, whom he designed for exhibition later on in the world tour he intended to make.

"More exhibits?" she asked regretfully. "It seems to me that, in a man like Lowell's case, by remaking his body you are killing his soul."

"Poor beggar, yes. It hits him hard, I know; he is too sensitive. But what can I do? I can't stop now that the machine is rolling."

"Like a Juggernaut, yes. It never struck me till lately what cruelty may go towards the making of a good end, what cruelty there must be in science."

"And, as you are too polite to add, in scientific men." He was watching her face attentively.

"Yes, inevitably, but I don't mean it for you particularly. In you, as in all of them, there must be something relentless, remorseless, almost subhuman." She belied the harshness of her words with a friendly smile.

"It was a happy chance that sent you here to-day," he said, when they had finished tea. "I've got to go to Paris to-morrow morning."

"For long?"

"About a week only, I hope. The *Sorbonne* is interested, and I want to establish myself over there. I am going to meet all their big pots, and lecture, and demonstrate a bit."

"To set the heel of your triumph on foreign soil, in fact! Sometimes I am fearful of the fruits of your triumph, Henry, but you have certainly done a very wonderful thing, very wonderful, very complete."

"Not complete."

"What heresy, Henry! But how?"

"Because—because, Joanna, there's something I must say to you. I have been putting it off, choking

it down, for some time, because I felt the time had not come. But I feel somehow to-day that I must put it off no longer. Joanna, have you realised that I love you?"

"Henry!"

He brushed aside her horrified exclamation. "Let me finish," he said. He did not move in his chair, but sat very still, gripping the arms of it with his two hands, and only the intense concentrated light in his eyes belied his calm, almost measured, voice and manner. "I knew you did not know it. I have loved you for a long time—since, I think, you first came out of the clinic in America—and it has grown and changed. Then I loved you half consciously, as the creator loves the thing he has made; almost I thought my love for you paternal. Now I love you as a man loves his God, with a greater intensity than any man of a northern race can love. And I have made myself wait to tell you till I had something to offer you, to lay at your feet. I want you as a crown and a recompense to my life's work."

He rose from his chair and stood before her; to her startled nerves he seemed to loom before her like something ominous. She shrank back in the big chair.

"Joanna, my dear one, I've taken you by surprise, but you needn't answer me yet. Just hear me out. I'm not young, and I seem to you presumptuous, but I swear I can love you as no younger man, no man of your race, could do. I love you—utterly. Men of my race love rarely as you understand love, but when

they do it's utterly and for always. All that I have done, all my life's work, all that I have struggled for and attained, all that lies before me yet to do, is yours. I don't value it unless you accept it. It all counts for nothing. It is a small exchange for yourself. I know you don't love me yet, but you will. I can make you. Now I only ask you to let me love you. Pity me if you like, but let me love you." He was speaking rapidly now, almost fiercely. " Five years ago I should have laughed at myself for what I am saying. My work and its ultimate reward were all that counted for me. Women were nothing to me except as relaxation. Sometimes a woman thought she loved me, but I could not let a woman interfere with my work, nor disturb my dreams. And I thought that when I had had my triumph I should want no more. And now I want you more than I have ever wanted anything. Joanna, don't fight against me. I always get what I want. Don't bruise yourself in trying to escape."

He had sunk down on a stool at her feet, and his face, on a level with hers, dark and violent, frightened her, not with a physical fear, but a fear that somehow seemed to threaten her, seemed to suck away her strength.

" Joanna, don't fight against me, for nothing in the world can fight my love. Allah! but I love you beyond all madness, Joanna."

" Henry, don't. I can't——"

" Why not, my beautiful? You are free, and I want

you. And I want to give you everything in the world, and I can. With you as my inspiration, there is nothing I can't do. I can conquer the world. Already I am on the way. All this is nothing in comparison with the future. 'The power of life and death'—that's what the papers call it. We can rule the world, you and I, and I shall be your slave. And I shall make you love me. You do not know what love can be. Ah, Joanna——"

His voice was harsh, as if strong feeling choked him. "Joanna, I want you!" he whispered.

With an effort of will she beat down the sense of oppression that weighed on her, and sat upright in her chair. She nerved herself to be brutal.

"Henry," she said clearly, even loudly, "you say I don't know what it is to love. I do."

"What do you mean?" The fierceness of his voice, the red light in the eyes so near her, beat down her temporary flicker of courage, and when she answered she gasped a little.

"I love Tancred Morries. I have promised to marry him. The announcement will be in the papers to-morrow."

"Allah! God!" He sank back on his heels, and his attitude reminded her of a desperate animal she had once seen at bay, who half crouched to spring, after a mortal wound. He remained so, motionless, then rose heavily to his feet, and she noticed that his hands trembled.

"Morries! A nice enough lad, but an effete product

of a worn-out aristocracy, whose life, before he meets a pretty woman, is made of farming and fox-hunting. He has blue eyes and nice curly hair, and you love each other! Joanna, that isn't love; it's the call of youth and warm blood. It is a pretty toy, but it isn't real. Play with it if you like, kiss it and fondle it, but don't take it seriously. Remember, I know you and of what you are capable, and I know Morries and his type. What has he to offer you?"

The name and the thought of Morries, and the slight that Antonius had cast upon him, gave her a fresh spurt of courage.

"Listen, Henry. I don't want to be brutal, but you must understand. When I say I love Tancred Morries I know what I am talking about. Do you remember saying once that if love found me it would be overwhelming? Well, it is like that. I love Tancred as you have said you love me, but with more tenderness, and more respect, and more selflessness. What he has to 'offer' me I don't know. I only know that I love him to the exclusion of everything else, that I want his constant companionship, and to live in his house, and to do things for him, and look after his children, to nurse him when he is ill, to grow old with him, and to die at the same moment as him."

Antonius stood absolutely still, as if trying to brace himself to meet something that hurt him. His immobility got on her nerves.

"I see," he said at last slowly.

Suddenly, with an abandon that was all the more painful because of his previous calm, he threw himself down beside her, his face working convulsively.

" Joanna, you *can't*! " he said. " You can't throw yourself away on this handsome young fool, who is taken by your pretty face. I tell you you don't understand. What you feel isn't love; it's just the mating instinct of youth; it's calf-love, a passing passion. And when that passion passes—as it will on his side, at any rate—think of the emptiness of life then to you, with your beauty and your youth and your brains and your fire, you who might be a queen, who, with me, might rule the world. You are not an ordinary 'pretty woman'; you have possibilities that no other woman ever possessed. And what about me? To such a man as Morries to lose you will be a disappointment, to me the shattering of a life. For I tell you I can't live without you. I am not even going to try. As I told you, I always get what I want, and it's you only that I want, and to you that I'm offering the world."

" Henry, please don't; it makes it so hard for us both. I am sorry, more terribly and awfully sorry than I can say. I have always looked upon you as my very dearest and best friend, and I do still, and I hate more than I can say to say things that may hurt you. But they've got to be said. I'd have cut off my right hand rather than this should have happened. I didn't realise. But you've got to understand. All you say about Tancred Morries

may be true; from the way you look at things, probably it is. I neither know nor care. The simple fact is that we love each other, and are going to marry each other. I'm desperately sorry about things, but when I'm out of your life you'll realise that really I'm nothing but a 'pretty woman,' one among many, and not worth more than another the great things you offer me. Oh, do please try and understand, and forgive, that I love Tancred Morries body and soul; that I shall always have for you all affection and friendship, but that the thought of any other relationship is to me—impossible."

While she spoke with a desperate earnestness she hated herself for not being able to express herself with greater kindness and gentleness. This miserable situation had been thrust upon her unawares, and she was utterly unprepared. She knew that her words were bald and brutal, and hated herself for it. The burning eyes of Antonius, fixed upon her, haunted her like a nightmare, weighed her down and frightened her.

He sat back quietly, and his voice had an unpleasant sneering tone.

"I see," he said again. "You love Morries and he loves you. I wonder what would be the result of his kind of temperament if he knew—certain things. I wonder if he would continue to love you with such idyllic ardour if he knew, for example, that for all your youth and loveliness you are an old woman. Let me see—sixty-seven, isn't it?"

"What do you mean? You're going to tell him? He wouldn't believe."

"Not I, but another might. It is hard to keep secrets in this world, my dear Joanna. They have an unpleasant way of cropping up sooner or later."

"I'm not afraid!" For a moment her face had turned pale, then her reason reasserted itself. "I'm not afraid. There is no one who knows except you, and I have your promise. If he were told he wouldn't believe; if he believed he wouldn't care. He loves me, you see—real love, not the sort you mean when you talk of it. Why should it make a difference? There is nothing in it to do so. I am young, really young; you have said so yourself. When a person really loves, there is nothing to be afraid of."

She had talked on angrily, not noticing or caring that his face was lowering and furious, that his mood was growing beyond his powers of self-control.

"Real love!" he exclaimed. "What do you know of it, you little fool? You know nothing but sighs and kisses, and roses and nightingales, and yet you sit there and talk to me and torture me. Damn you, what are you that you should make me as puling and delicate as a moonstruck calf? You tempt me to prove to you the opposite!" He came closer to her, so close that instinctively she stood up. "Are you frightened of me? You well may be, for you've tortured me almost beyond my powers of endurance. You're so beautiful that a jury of men would acquit me of anything—of murder even." He caught her

lightly by the shoulders. "Don't shrink away. I'm not going to kill you. You're too beautiful, and, besides, 'while there's life there's hope,' you know, according to your English proverb. Look at me!" He held her closer as she tried to break from his strong hands, where the thick blue veins stood out. "Hope, I said! I've told you that I always get anything I want, and I want you. Don't you see the connection? Not yet, perhaps, but some time—— God, but you're beautiful, and I want you!"

She felt his hot breath on her cheek, and it sickened her. The room was oppressively warm, the heavy scent of the burning aromatic wood was overwhelming her, and for a moment she felt as if she were going to faint. Her limbs were loose and heavy as lead.

"Don't look at me like that!" The harsh voice was close to her ear. "Anyone as beautiful as you can be generous. Your blue-eyed lover can spare a few kisses to a poor devil who is dying down in hell. Give me your lips—your lips, I tell you. Don't fight, or I might kill you by mistake." His powerful arms held her in an embrace that she could not break from. To her terrified senses his dark face close to hers was the face of a devil whom she did not recognise, the heavy voice, measured and slow, seemed a thin veil between self-control and a madness which she feared to let loose.

"Henry, for pity sake——"

"Your lips! Allah!" panted the voice.

She was struggling now, but quietly, the courage of outrage upon her. She was so slight and so quick that the clutching arms could not hold her, and the groping lips could not find hers, though they fell upon her neck and her hair.

With a sudden quick movement she broke from his grasp, and with her ringed hand struck him a sharp blow across the eyes. She did not know she had the strength to hit so hard. He fell back gasping, though not with the momentary pain she had inflicted. He looked uncertain, almost dazed, and the violence died out of his eyes. She turned silently to the door.

He uttered a sound that was half a groan, and passed his hand over his eyes.

" Joanna," he said, in a low, breathless voice, " I am utterly, abjectly ashamed. Will you believe that? I was worse than a brute. For a moment I lost control. I had gone through hell. Will you forgive me? "

She smiled wearily.

" That's all right, Henry," she said, in a weak voice, her hand on the handle of the door. Again he passed his hand over his eyes.

" There's nothing I can say now, is there? " he said. " And I can't stand any more." Then, with a visible effort, he regained his normal manner as he led her through the hall.

" There's nothing I can say now," he repeated, as he opened the door, " but I hope you will be kind

enough to let me see you when I get back from Paris."

Her mind felt numb and bewildered as she taxied back to Knightsbridge. She was suddenly conscious of fatigue, physical and mental. It had been a nightmare, her interview with Antonius in the over-warm, over-scented room where she had spent many peaceful, friendly hours; the phantasy of a nightmare, the distorted face of her old friend. She realised now, with regretful pain, how much her friendship with Antonius had meant in her life, how she had relied on his calm, ever-ready comradeship. She felt as a person feels who, after an earthquake, sees an ugly gaping chasm in lieu of a well-remembered and pleasant garden. It had all been so ugly, such a sordid ending to a friendship. To her tired mind it seemed as if something sinister and unclean had flapped black wings at her.

An abstracted glance at the clock as she passed Hyde Park Corner brought her back to reality. It was nearly half-past seven, and Tancred was coming to dine at eight. She must not tell him of her interview with Antonius. She told herself that Tancred was jealous and not always reasonable, and that at best he had never liked Antonius. She could not bear any fresh discordance to-day. She was too tired.

She hurried through her evening toilet with mechanical precision, and ran feverishly downstairs when the maid announced his arrival. He met her, debonair and beaming, with an enormous bunch of

sweet-smelling flowers from the greenhouses of Carlyon that he had brought up in the car. He was surprised and moved by the almost childlike abandon with which she threw herself into his arms for his greeting kiss. Long after he remembered that gesture—the sheltering gesture of a child who is afraid.

CHAPTER XII

THE next week was a whirl of engagements. The wedding was fixed for the 15th of December. There were dressmakers, hatmakers, jewellers, lingerie artists, furriers, and photographers to see, and a host of people, with boxes of gaily coloured shapes and sizes, poured in a constant stream in and out of the Knightsbridge house. Garments of a filmy loveliness hung over every piece of furniture; the contents of little leather boxes lay scattered in wanton profusion. There was a coming and going of messenger and telegraph boys. The house was to let, and there were tickets to take, and accommodation to be reserved in trains and boats and hotels. And there was the parrot-house.

The formal announcement had duly appeared in the *Morning Post* and *The Times*, followed by a joyous chorus in all the society papers, and a flood of photographs representing Joanna in every variety of gown, and of Tancred Morries, and of Carlyon from every angle—its moat, its picture gallery, its rose garden, its monks' walk, its peacocks. The parrot-house was delighted. This was undoubtedly *the* engagement of the season—Lord Morries, one of the most eligible *partis* of London, for whom the mothers in the forefront of the marriage market had long sighed and

angled; and the beautiful Mrs. Fersen, the year's loveliest bit of woman flesh, both of them young, well bred, good-looking, and rich. It was all so romantic, my dear! All marriages are romantic when the parties are young, well bred, good-looking, and rich! And what if there was an eligible the less in London? Was there not another country house thrown open for the parrot-house to scream in? It was not only romantic, but it was thrilling.

The host on the Knightsbridge doorstep was swelled by a succession of special messengers, bearing more parcels of a lumpier outline—silver teasets, cruet stands, candlesticks, blotters, pictures, and china and glass-ware, and more jewels. There were cards to sort out, letters of thanks and congratulations to answer, invitations to accept or reject, begging letters to tear up, relations to see, introductions to make. The Little Season was at its height, and Joanna and Morries were in clamorous demand at every lit candle. They seemed so triumphant, so radiantly happy, that it was a pleasure to see them. There was a spice in wondering "how long it would last," and whether "The voice that breathed" would be the usual preliminary whisper to the usual divorce. Through it all danced Morries and Joanna in the usual pre-nuptial parade, reminding each other by an occasional glance of mutual understanding how happy they were, how glad they would be when it was all over. Morries wore the usual proud, possessive air of the accepted bridegroom who has cut out a host of other aspirants.

Joanna's was a happiness of calm trust. All the minor complexities of life, all its unpleasant patches of shadow, had been blotted out ; everything was perfect, everything was sure. So does love blind and intoxicate as a draught of strong wine.

" It's almost like being married, having you for once to myself like this," said Morries to Joanna one day as they lunched quietly together in a sheltered corner of the Ritz. " I was beginning to feel like a fox with the hounds and a big field after me."

She laughed.

" Yes, I'm hoarse with talking and stiff with smiling. I've got writer's cramp from writing, and housemaid's knee from trying on clothes."

" Never mind, it'll soon be over."

" Yes, it'll soon be over." Their eyes met in a grave, confident smile, and their hands, to the honest joy of a sentimental and homesick young Italian waiter, met for a moment under the table.

" I suppose we must go ; the waiters are beginning to flap their napkins at us," he said presently. " What are we going to do this afternoon ? "

" I'm going to give you the afternoon off," she said. " You can drop me at Knightsbridge, and then run away and play by yourself."

" Why so exclusive ? "

" I've got a heap of things to do. Some clothes to try on, and some shopping, and then a tea-fight *chez* Antonius to meet H.R.H."

" Don't you want me to take you to the tea-fight ? "

"No, it wouldn't amuse you. I'm only going to look in for a moment."

"Righto. I've got my lawyer dining at the club to fix up much legal dreariness. I'll call for you about ten for the Grosvenor House show. Sure you don't want me this afternoon?"

"Not a bit. I'll get through it all quicker by myself."

She spoke lightly, but quite definitely she did not want him to accompany her to Antonius's tea-party. She herself disliked enough the idea of going, but did not see how she could get out of it. Antonius had returned from Paris a few days previously, and it had been intimated to him that one of the Royal Princes was anxious to meet him and his two living experiments. Invitations had been hurriedly sent out and that of Joanna, which had arrived that morning by hand, had been accompanied by a personal note:

> "Be generous, and show that you have forgiven me by coming. Please come. It will take a great load of unhappiness and self-reproach from my mind.—H.A."

Not to go would be to attach too much importance to an unfortunate incident best forgotten between old friends, and would hurt his feelings. She was sorry for him; men were taken like that occasionally, and he had been living a life of intense strain. His nerves were overwrought. All rancour and bitterness had

passed; she was so happy, so triumphantly pleased with life, that she felt kindly towards everyone, sorry for everyone not as happy as herself. But she did not want Tancred to come with her; it would seem too much like wantonly rubbing it in, unkind and in bad taste. This was the only motive she acknowledged to herself.

There were parcels of undergarments waiting for her to choose from. She tried on the gossamer creations of silk and lace one after the other, appraising and selecting. On the bed lay an iridescent sheen of white and silver. It was her wedding-dress, arrived that morning, that her maid had forgotten to put away. She had had the finished fitting only yesterday, but a sudden curiosity prompted her to try its effect by daylight. She slipped it over her head, with deft fingers rearranging a fold or two, and criticising the hang of the long court train. As she stood in front of the long mirror it shimmered and glowed in the pale November sunlight like a moonlit sea. She looked like an enchanted princess out of a book of fairy-stories.

"Oh, madam!" Hodges, the maid stood in the door, her hands lifted in horror.

"What's the matter, Hodges? Don't you like it?"

"Oh, madam, you've never been and put on your wedding-dress. They say it brings bad luck."

"You're a superstitious croaker, Hodges," Joanna teased her. "I'm surprised at you! But isn't it pretty?"

But Hodges refused to be mollified as she put the gown away, and dressed her mistress in outdoor things.

Though it was scarcely half-past four when she reached the house of Antonius, there was a stream of waiting cars and taxis lining the quiet road. Though the invitations had given very short notice, the parrot-house had strained every effort to arrive in force. Not only was it to have the felicity of meeting one of the Royal sons, but it was also the first party that Antonius had given in his own house—the house of so many rumours, the house whose walls held mystery, the secret of life and death. The whole thing intrigued the popular imagination. It was known, too, that Lowell and Mrs. Newton were going to be on view, those two strange apocryphal beings who looked young and were old.

" I don't know that one ought to encourage it, but I admit to being curious," whispered befeathered matrons to each other in the upholstered privacy of landaulettes. " It's really uncanny ; it gives me the creeps," whispered younger women. " I wonder if he has got any experiments in process now ? " " Do you know if anyone has gone to him ? " " The fellow must make a good bit out of it," murmured an occasional resigned man, who felt he was making rather a fool of himself.

The big room at the back was filled to overflowing ; the aromatic scent of the fire was drowned in a rising tide of expensive essences ; the air was thick with

chatter and cigarette smoke. Joanna saw a hundred faces that she knew, and was greeted by a score of voices. Most of the Horsham's Mount party were there—Grace Illington, escorted by the new Bolshevik operatic tenor; Rose and Socks; and Joseph Hart in a flowing black tie, looking more than ever like a dyspeptic epigram. By the fireplace, Antonius, black-coated and button-holed, answered urbanely pertinent questions fired at him by the Prince, a slim, elegant little figure with an ingratiating smile. Stared at furtively or brazenly, critically or sympathetically, were Lowell and Jane Newton, surrounded each by an inquisitive knot of people. Jane Newton, Joanna noticed, seemed indifferent to it all. She answered the questions put to her bluntly, with a stolid, conscientious indifference, glancing occasionally towards Antonius, as a dog looks at his master to see if it is doing right.

"Poor Lowell, he is playing up like a little hero," reflected Joanna pitifully. Lowell's face looked white, and was set in a strained smile as he talked with a forced, nervous animation, and on his forehead stood little beads of perspiration that were not caused by the heat of the room. She guessed something of the agonised humiliation his sensitive soul was suffering. From a feeling of delicacy she did not go near him, but made her way towards the group by the fireplace.

"Thank you," whispered Antonius, as she shook hands. After presentation and a few minutes' conversation with the Prince, she was drawn into a

corner near the tea-table by the Horsham's Mount party.

"Isn't it too thrilling?" whispered Grace Illington. "But doesn't the poor man look ill? I never saw such a change. He'll be needing his own cure next."

It was true. Antonius looked very ill, with haggard, lined face and feverish eyes. Even his massive frame stooped, and seemed to have fallen in, and his animated gestures were mechanical, as if he kept himself going by will-power only.

"A wonderful-looking brute, but, gad! what a bounder!" commented Socks in a whisper. "He's on his best behaviour to-day, but I'm told he's been so arrogant lately that even Mrs. Smythe thought twice about kicking him out of her party last night. He used to be almost oily—harmlessly so—but now he doesn't seem to care how he behaves."

Joseph Hart turned on Joanna his languidly impertinent stare, that was oddly half Semitic, half Cockney.

"May I be so banal as to congratulate you," he said. "Mount Horsel the highroad to matrimony! You've reversed the rule of Lohengrin."

"Hullo, there's Tanks," exclaimed Rose. "Don't blush, Joanna!"

Joanna suppressed an exclamation of annoyance. Morries was making his way joyously towards her through the crowd, followed by a tall young man.

"Jerry Fitzpatrick," he whispered. "Our best

man to be. Ran into him at the Turkish bath, and he wanted to come along to meet you, but was too shy to come alone. You don't mind ? "

" Of course not, but I've got to run along home very soon. I've a heap of letters to write before dinner."

A sense of discomfort had seized her. She had caught the eye of Antonius, from his place by the fire, resting on Tancred and herself, and she wondered if it was her imagination that the red light that she had learnt to dread flickered in them, and that his hands slowly clenched and unclenched themselves for a moment. She longed to leave the party. She wished that Tancred would not look at her with such a possessive, lover-like expression, and that he had not kissed her hand as he greeted her.

" Who's that queer-looking body in green who's staring at us ? " he whispered, and again she wished he would not speak so close to her ear. He lowered his voice still further as she frowned at him. " Is it one of the experiments ? " She nodded.

" She seems to have taken a fancy to us, or to me ! She hasn't taken her eyes off me since I came in. Aren't you jealous ? " Joanna noticed that Jane Newton was whispering about them, apparently asking some question. As she slowly pushed her way to the door she passed Lowell. He looked white and drawn, as if physically exhausted.

" Hating life ? " she asked sympathetically.

" It is hell ! "

" You're a hero. Stick to it; it's nearly over." She gave him a warm handclasp.

" Bless you."

She felt tired as she sat down to dinner after a busy hour of telephoning and letter-writing. She had been incessantly on the rush for the last fortnight. She was looking forward inexpressibly to the time when it would all be over, and she would have Tancred to herself, and they would wander together through the broad horizons of North Africa, under a mellow sun, far out of hearing of the screaming of the parrot-house, getting to know each other in all the little ways that bind man and woman together. And then, in the spring they would settle at Carlyon, and then would married life really begin. They had agreed to keep on the little Knightsbridge house as a *pied-à-terre*, but they did not mean to spend much time in London. The parrot-house would be disappointed, but the parrot-house did not count for much in their scheme of life. Nothing counted but Tancred; she wondered if any woman had loved a man as she loved Tancred.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck nine. She would go upstairs and change leisurely from her tea-gown and smoke a cigarette while waiting for him. As she passed through the drawing-room she heard the front door slam, and Tancred's voice in the hall. He had got rid of his dinner-guest very early. So much the better.

The door was thrown open, and he walked in.

" Bravo, Tanks," she began, running forward to meet

him, and then stopped dead, staring at him. He was still in day clothes, and his hair was rather untidy, but it was the expression on his face that arrested her. It was set and dead-looking, as if he were under the influence of some shock.

"Tanks, what is it?" Her voice was breathless, as if she had been running. She had a sudden sense of looming disaster.

He stared at her in silence, his face still wearing the same stony look, as if he were looking at a stranger, as if he were looking at someone or something that frightened him. "Frightened"—that was the word that sprang into her mind. He looked as if he were afraid.

"Tanks, what is it?" She put out her hand as if to touch him, and he drew back a little. She, too, was frightened, though she did not exactly know of what. She felt that if he did not speak she should scream.

"Tanks, say something! Bad news? You're ill?"

He shook his head slowly, cleared his throat with an effort, and opened his mouth as if to speak, then shut it again.

"Tanks, you're inhuman. Tell me what's the matter!"

"Inhuman!" His voice was deep and harsh, as if speech hurt him. And still he stared at her with that air of stony curiosity. Again he cleared his throat, and jerked back his shoulders.

"Joanna," he said at last, slowly, "I don't know

how to say it. Will you tell me something straight? I shall believe whatever you say—just yes or no Are you—did you—did you ever know Antonius professionally?"

"Professionally? What do you mean?" She shrank back. Out of the chaos that had suddenly filled her mind one fact stood out. The blow had fallen. *He knew!*

"Professionally—what I say. Did you——" His voice became firm, even hard. "Are you—one of Antonius's experiments?"

"Why do you ask such a question?"

"Just tell me first. Are you?" Into the frightened curiosity of his eyes had sprung a hint of entreaty. Her mind raced like a mad thing. "I shall believe whatever you say." In that phrase lay escape. A lie of just one word. He would believe her. Everything in her life—her life itself almost—lay in one word that he would believe. The temptation was overwhelming.

"Are you?" His voice was quiet, inexorable.

She could not lie.

"Yes," she whispered.

There was a silence that must have lasted for fully two minutes. Her eyes devoured his stony, expressionless face. She wondered if she were going mad. His silence was killing her.

"Well?" Her mouth was so dry she could scarcely speak, and the monosyllable came thin and cracked.

He shrugged his shoulders like a man who is

exhausted. Obviously he wanted to speak, but could not find the words.

"Say something, Tanks!" The silly little pet name sounded monstrous somehow at that moment.

"What can I say? It's true!"

She felt a feverish desire to speak, for anything to end this ghastly, groping restraint, but she could find no adequate words.

"Yes, it's true," she whispered in the same cracked voice. "Is it so—awful?"

He looked at her in silence.

"Is it so awful? I—went to him three years ago——" She broke off. Words seemed to have lost their meaning and their grip. He was still looking at her with that dreadful air of detached curiosity.

"How old are you?"

"Sixty-seven."

"Sixty-seven!" He repeated her whispered words, as if they had no meaning for him. Suddenly a question stood out in the chaos of her mind.

"Who told you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Was it Antonius?"

"Does it matter?" he repeated, parrot-like.

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes. . . . It was not Antonius who told me in the first instance."

"But he confirmed it?"

"Yes."

They were standing facing each other, not looking

at each other, and their questions and answers had been given with the mechanical regularity of clock-work toys. Silence again fell heavily upon them; seemed to root them to the ground. It was Morries who broke it. Again he cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders.

"Joanna, I'm sorry. You must forgive me if I seem—odd." He spoke unevenly, jerkily, as if speech came hard to him. "What can I say? I feel—I don't know what. Forgive me."

"Tanks——" A warm, live instinct found its way through the horrid numbness that lay on her, and she made a forward gesture with her hands. He did not seem to notice it.

"Forgive me," he said again, in the same jerky voice. "I'm sort of stupid. You must give me time." His eyes wandered to the door, and she caught his glance.

"Of course," she said mechanically. "We both want to—think. Come back to-morrow."

A faint hint of relief flickered over his face.

"Thank you, Joanna. You're good. Yes. To-morrow." She opened the door, and he passed through it in silence, not looking at her.

"Good night, Joanna."

"Good night." Their voices echoed in the silent house like the voices of ghosts. She heard the front door slam.

She stood immovable in the pretty drawing-room for fully five minutes, so motionless that one would

have said that she did not breathe, her face devoid of all expression. The clock on the mantelpiece struck ten. The faint tinkling sound seemed to galvanise her into life—feverish life. She ran upstairs to her bedroom, tearing open, in frantic scrambled haste, the doors of her dress cupboard, fumbling till she found a fur wrap. With the same distracted haste she ran downstairs, through the silent hall into the street. Hailing a taxi, she called an address to the driver and drove rapidly away.

. . . . . .

In his scented, over-warm house in Regent's Park, Henry Antonius sat huddled over the fire. A row of decanters and glasses stood by his side, and from time to time he bent over and poked the fire to a still higher blaze. He had not changed from his clothes of the afternoon, but had merely exchanged his black coat for a crimson velvet smoking-jacket. The scarcely touched remains of a light dinner lay on a tray near by. From time to time he shivered. Undoubtedly, as the parrot-house had said that afternoon, he looked an ill man, and ten years older than when he had come to London. In spite of the shivers that ran through him, his hands to his own touch felt dry and burning, and his head ached abominably. He appeared sunk deep in thought, and from time to time he stared into the heart of the live coals, his mouth tightened viciously, and a flicker of red light made his eyes look fierce. Though he was tired, his mind would not rest; it

conjured up a jumbled succession of the events of the day ; of Joanna looking her loveliest in her rich furs, of Tancred Morries as he bent over her, and the love-light in their encountering eyes. Unconsciously he clenched his veined hands. The hundred voices of the parrot-house still rang in his ears. His party had undoubtedly been a success. He laughed grimly as he thought with a frown of an interview he had taken part in since.

The door opened, and a male attendant from the clinic appeared.

" Anything more to-night, sir ? " the man asked.

" Nothing. Everything all right over there ? "

" Perfectly, sir. No. 2 was a bit restless, but is sleeping nicely now."

" Right. Then you can close up for the night. I'll be over at eight in the morning."

" Thank you, sir." A hesitant note of humanity crept into the man's voice. " Aren't you well, sir ? You've not eaten your dinner."

" It's nothing. I'm tired. It's been a long day. I want rest, that's all. Good night, Saunders."

" Good night, sir."

The door closed, and silence settled again on the room. Antonius resumed his meditations. The interruption had changed their unpleasant trend, and it would appear that he dreamed, and that his dreams were pleasant ones, for sometimes he smiled. An observer would not have relished his smile ; there was something sensuous and yet cruel about it, and his eyes

suddenly looked long and slanting, as do the eyes of an Oriental when he dreams of women. Sometimes his hands sketched a half-conscious gesture, as if they clutched something soft and pleasant and yielding, and his slanting smile was a little triumphant.

He frowned impatiently as the door opened again to admit his butler.

"A lady asking to see you, sir," said the man. "She said it was urgent. Mrs. Fersen."

Antonius sat upright, and his face was expressionless.

"Show her in, Jacobs. And after that you can go to bed. I will let her out. We shan't want anything more."

"Very good, sir."

He rose from his chair as light steps sounded outside.

"Joanna!" He held out welcoming hands, but dropped them again. "Joanna, what's the matter?"

She looked at him stonily, though her twitching hand betrayed her tortured nerves.

"Need you ask? You did it."

"Did it? What do you mean?"

"Don't lie. You told Tancred Morries that I was—one of your experiments."

"Ah, that? You have seen Morries? Sit down, Joanna, and drink this. You need it." He handed her a stiff brandy and soda, which she ignored.

"First of all, Joanna, let me tell you that it was not I who told him. Someone else had told him first."

"But he came to you, and you confirmed it."

He nodded. She had swallowed the brandy, and her voice was steadier. "Who told him?"

"Jane Newton. Yes"—he answered her start of surprise. "It's a long story. To put it all briefly, well, I told you once that she believed herself in love with me. It had become an obsession with her. She guessed I loved you, and she hated you, and planned to harm you. She got a suspicion, God knows how—instinct, I suppose—and when the clinic was under repairs, and upside down, she got access to my papers. Your name was not among them, only a photo, but she put things together in her mind. I have had this confirmed since by Lowell, to whom she boasted on her return from Morries's chambers, and who came to me. She hated you like a fury in hell. This afternoon she got her opportunity; she slipped out when Morries left just after you, and followed him to his rooms. He did not believe at first; he tried to put her out. But she used her devil's tongue. She made it clear as daylight. He was overwhelmed, and, hating himself, came to me."

"And you confirmed it?"

"Yes. And before we go further let me tell you that your secret is safe here. Lowell worships you; Jane Newton I have silenced—never mind how; Morries is not likely to talk. So you can set your mind at rest."

"And you told him?" Her voice was hard.

"Yes."

"Why did you break your word?"

"I didn't. He knew already."

"You quibble. You admitted it. He would have believed your word—your lie against her truth."

"Did you expect me to lie—under the circumstances?"

If she had been less oblivious to everything but her own unhappiness she would have noticed that he had the air of a cat who plays with a mouse.

"He would have believed you," she repeated dully. Suddenly her voice shook, and she leant forward, her whole being throbbing with the anguish that was beginning to thaw her frozen misery.

"He would have believed you—he would have believed you," she repeated over and over again.

"Did you lie to him?"

"No, I couldn't. Besides, what was the use? It was too late." She bowed her head in her hands, and her body shook with sobs, though her eyes were dry. "But he would have believed you. One word from you would have saved him. But you told him." She leant forward, staring him in the face, with agonised eyes. "Why did you tell him? Henry, why did you tell him?"

"Why should I not have told him?" Antonius stared back at her mercilessly, stared till at last her numbed senses took in his meaning.

"Because—because of what you told me the other day?"

"Because I love you!"

"Love me! Love! You call that love, to kill

the thing you pretend to love. You couldn't get me by fair means, so you tried by foul, and you call that love!"

"Love! If it comes to that, do you call it love to marry a man under false pretences, knowing his kind, his mentality, his prejudices; a man—didn't you guess it?—who at the first breath of truth would shrink from you? For that is what he has done, hasn't he? Though he is what your world calls a gentleman, and, if you demand it, will probably stand by his pledged word. Is his love? Is yours love?"

"And you, who have broken your pledged word?"

"I am not a gentleman, thank God. Joanna, didn't I tell you that I always got what I wanted?"

"Got what you wanted? How have you done it? You have killed me, that's all."

"Don't you see, Joanna?"

"See what? Oh, don't lets argue and split hairs. Henry, have pity on me. Remember the friends that we've been, and have pity on me. You can put it right; it's not too late. Just one word from you."

"A word from me—a lie. Supposing I could do it, what would you do for me?"

"Anything in the world. Anything."

"Anything? That might be a big thing."

"Nothing could be too great. Henry, you say you know what it is to love. Listen; this is my whole life, Henry, more than life. Don't look at me like that. Have pity on me. I throw myself on your

pity." The tears were running down her face; she threw herself at his feet, crouching, imploring him with her tear-blinded eyes.

"Anything? Joanna, if by some word I could put things right for you, and persuade Morries that all we had told him was false, that you were normal, what would you do for me? Would you give yourself to me for one night?"

"If you asked it. Anything—oh, anything!"

"I don't ask it! I don't want crumbs. I won't do as you ask."

"Henry!" Her voice was a moan. "Have pity. Have you no charity, no humanity?"

"Not of that sort. Has the world ever shown it to me? Have you shown it to me? I don't know right or wrong, according to your standards; I don't know what your God teaches, or what one of your 'gentlemen' would do; I only know that I love you. Joanna, didn't you hear me say that I always got what I wanted?"

She raised her swollen face uncomprehendingly.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you understand yet—don't you see? Don't blind yourself. Your pretty idyll is broken. Morries does not love you now that he knows; and think, it would have been worse if he had learnt later. It was inevitable that sooner or later he would know, and it was inevitable that he should fail you. It's his kind and his breeding. And if he should hear the truth, why not others? Oh, it is not I who will tell

them. I am not threatening; I don't need to; I only point out the possibility. Another man might not mind, but, on the other hand, he might. It would, I think, be the same with all your northern normal Englishmen, your 'gentlemen.'"

"Whatever you may say, you're threatening me."

"No, I'm not threatening you—yet. Though, to quote your own proverb, 'All is fair in love.' That is how I love you. Joanna, don't you see, there is no escape but through me. I can take you out of reach of everyone, out of the daily, hourly risk, out of the worry, the doubt. I can make you forget your 'gentleman.' If you like, we can leave England, leave Europe; we can live where you like, how you like; we can start all over again. Joanna, don't harden yourself against me; don't make yourself think the worst of me. I have spoken plainly, but I have to make you see, make you see that there is no use crying over spilt milk, milk that may be spilt again; make you see that your only hope of happiness, without fear and without anxiety, is through me. I can remake your world for you, I swear it. I do not want to give you bitterness; I want to give you happiness and peace. And I can; I can give you the world; I can share it with you if you will let me."

The tears had dried on the swollen face that she lifted to him, and her body had drawn itself erect.

"And if I refuse it? If I tell you that I would rather die than marry you, than touch your hand

even ? " She rose to her feet and faced him stormily ; the pleading in her voice and eyes had gone.

" Then I can only remind you, Joanna, that I always get what I want."

" Everything, perhaps, except me. You have killed my love, killed my life—the parts of it that mattered ; perhaps, too, you may succeed in killing the rest. For that I don't care. It doesn't matter now. I am not afraid of you any longer ; there is no further harm you can do me."

" I wonder ! " He looked at her reflectively, and once more he had the air of a cat who plays with a mouse. The look vanished as suddenly as it had come, with one of his quick transitions of mood, and when he looked at her again his voice was quiet but final.

" I am sorry," he said. " I have wanted to win you by what you call 'fair means.' I am not naturally a brute, though to you it may seem that my love for you has turned me into one. I only realise that my need for you is so utter that nothing else matters ; that all my cultivated instincts of civilisation have been swept away by nature, as all meretricious things are swept away by a great fire ; that nothing in heaven or earth shall stand in my way. You do not understand it now, but I think some day—soon, perhaps—you will. And I think that then you will come to me of your own accord."

She stared at him blindly for the minute. There was suffering in her eyes, but there was no light in them. It seemed as if something had died in her,

died silently without a moan. When she answered, her voice was as calm and passionless as his.

"There is nothing further to say, is there?" she said, and moved slowly to the door. There was no further word spoken between them as she left the house.

She sat in the same frozen silence all the way home in the taxi. She paid her driver, demanding change with composed precision, and let herself quietly into the silent house. With the same mechanical deliberation she went to bed, and lay motionless and silent, staring with dead eyes into the darkness till dawn brought her the consolation of tears.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN the maid came to call her late the following morning she was asleep. She did not stir till lunch-time, sunk in the drugged sleep of absolute exhaustion. Early in the afternoon she went down to the drawing-room to await her interview with Morries. For over an hour she sat motionless, not stirring by a hair's breadth, her eyes fixed in front of her, staring at nothing, thinking of nothing, just waiting.

At half-past four he was announced, and she noticed with a detached pity how ill he looked, haggard and white under his tan, as if he had not slept. In the same detached way he noticed, too, how lovely she looked—lovelier than he had ever known her. Tears and misery had not dimmed her beauty; her eyes, black rimmed, looked enormous in the pallor of her face, made it more than ever like a languid white flower. She held out her hand in greeting, and he made as if to put his arm round her, to stoop and kiss her. She drew back.

"You needn't," she said quietly. He looked at her reproachfully, and yet she knew that he felt a kind of shamed relief.

"Don't," he said. "You make me feel more than ever a brute. I was a brute yesterday—a heartless brute. Not once did I think of you, or what you must

be feeling. I only thought of myself—or, rather, I didn't think."

"And now you've thought?" They had seated themselves on opposite sides of the fire, and a casual observer might have thought that their's was an ordinary tea-time conversation.

"And now you've thought?" she repeated. In her eyes there flickered for a moment the faintest gleam of expectation, scarcely of hope, that made him wince.

"After a fashion—only after a fashion. It's—it's simply beyond me. Can you forgive me?"

"For what?"

"For yesterday. Even now I don't know what to say. It's so—so unbelievable."

"And yet it's true. Tanks, for a moment yesterday I tried to lie to you, but I couldn't, though it has nearly killed me, the thought that I shall not see you again."

"Not see me again? What do you mean?"

"Why, of course, that I release you from our engagement."

"Release me?" He paused. "I didn't come here to-day, Joanna, for that." But again over his face flickered a faint hint of relief that went through her like a sharp knife.

"Didn't you? I believe you, and I'm glad. You're a good fellow, Tanks."

"Why do you say that? Why do you break off our engagement?"

"Because I love you, Tanks, love you so much that I can't bear your not loving me." She raised her hand

to check his gesture of protest. "Don't be well-meaning, Tanks, don't be! I can't bear it. I've faced it all out; please let me down gently. For a while last night I let myself be deluded; let myself imagine that it might make no difference, that I might get you back. But I know I couldn't. It does make a difference, all the difference in the world—to you."

"To me? You think it wouldn't to most men? You think I'm a cur?"

"A cur? Of course not, my dear; only a man. What other men would feel I don't know—probably much the same. But the fact remains. It doesn't make me love you any the less. I wish it did, or, rather, I don't wish it, for if I didn't love you so much I might try and keep you. I might succeed, in a way—for nothing can take away my body—a way I don't want. And we would both be miserable. I, perhaps, even more than you. Honestly, dear, I had not quite realised that I, being—being as I am, would make such a difference, but I see it now, and I'm sorry."

He glanced at her with a sudden involuntary surprise.

"You didn't realise? But supposing it had been the other way round—if it had been me who had been—in your circumstances, wouldn't it have mattered to you?"

"No, it wouldn't. I don't know why, but it wouldn't. I suppose that is the difference between a woman's and a man's way of loving. To me you are you; you would always be you, whatever happened,

and that is all that counts to me—to most women, I think."

They stared in silence at the fire for a few minutes.

"But why did you do it?" he burst out suddenly, violently. "Why did you let yourself do this ghastly thing?"

"Don't you understand? Oh, can't you imagine?" He shook his head. "Listen, I'll try and make you. All my early life—my other life—I had not lived. I had been a drudge, a beast of burden; I had known nothing of life as ordinary women know it. I just existed. Then things changed, and I found myself old and ugly and lonely. Jane Newton showed you my photograph?" He nodded, with a slight contraction of the face, as if the memory hurt him. "You see! Then I was given the chance of life, real life, of youth and all that that means. Can't you understand? If I was stricken near to death by a mortal illness, would you expect me to refuse an operation that would make me live?" The measured calm to which she had flagellated herself had vanished, and her voice rose passionate and vibrant. "Would you, if I were starving, have me reject a meal set before me, or, if I were drowning, push away a floating spar? Try and think of it. Imagine yourself old and outside human sympathy, old without ever having been young, yet strong and longing for life, for work and affection and achievement, for life itself. And if such a chance had been offered to you, as it was to me, would you have refused it? Wouldn't you have snatched at it?"

"I—I don't know. I might. But——"

"But what? Oh, I know! And supposing you had been in my place, feeling young, being young really in mind and body and soul, would you feel abnormal, monstrous, outside the human pale? Wouldn't you take what life brought you?"

"I don't know. A man—isn't that different?"

"Why? We're all the same; we've all the same desire, the same right to cling to life."

"To life, maybe; that is the individual's own concern. But marriage and things like that?"

"Why not?" She hurled herself desperately against the stone wall of his non-comprehension. "Take me, for example. Oh, I'm not appealing to your pity, or trying to make you take me back; I'm just putting the case. Why should a man shrink from me? I'm not a monster; I'm not abnormal any more than is a young woman or a young man who has been saved by a clever doctor from a mortal illness. My mind, soul, and body are young, healthy, and sane. I am as other women; I can work and play, love, bear children, and grow old as they do."

He was silent.

"I know. You are too kind to tell me what you feel. But I know that, though all I say is true, there is something—something that, if you or perhaps another man were married to me, would rise like a ghost between, something that would frighten and repel, even disgust. Isn't that it?" He fidgeted miserably, but she paid no attention, torturing herself

with her insight into the things he could not say. "As you talked with such a woman, or saw her among a crowd of people, or faced her across the table, as you took her in your arms, that something would stand between you, would grin at you with the face of an old woman, grin with toothless mouth and hollow eyes and shrivelled skin, and *your* skin would contract from contact with a shrunken, unbeautiful body, from the touch of her skinny hands. Oh, I know, I know." She covered her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook.

Morries was consumed with a miserable, shame-faced pity. He crossed the intervening space, and dropped on his knees beside her.

"Don't, my dear, my dear," he murmured. "It's not true, it's not true."

She raised her tear-stained face.

"Thank you for that lie," she said. "It was a gallant one. But I *know*." She dried her eyes and pushed the hair from her damp forehead. "Sit down, Tanks. Don't let me lose my self-control. I know, you see, at last, and thank God I found it out in time. I couldn't have borne to spoil your life."

"My life? Does that matter so much? What about yours? What will you do?"

"Do? I don't know. I haven't thought yet. Go on much the same as hitherto, I suppose. It doesn't matter much. I have still another forty years or so, unless God is kind, to go on living—without you." She uttered the last two words in an undertone so

low that he only just caught them. Again he dropped beside her, putting his arms round her. She tried to push him off, but the joy of the old, sweet contact was too strong for her, and she let her body relax.

"My dear, my dear, do you care like that?" His voice shook. "Oh, God, I feel a cur, a worthless worm. That you should cry for me! I wish I had died before it could be possible. Joanna, my dear, don't take it like that. Perhaps—perhaps we've been torturing ourselves with a chimera. All this has been so sudden, so devastatingly sudden. I don't know how to say it, but perhaps, if we gave ourselves time —— Oh, God, and I loved you so, I loved you so!" Even as her body shook in a passion of weeping she noticed his use of the past tense. "All that we have meant to each other! I feel the meanest cur on earth. If we gave ourselves time——" In his pity and shamed self-abasement, in his longing to console, he had lost for a moment his dreadful, involuntary shrinking from her; he stroked her wet cheek with a kind of hopeless tenderness. For a moment she surrendered herself to the exquisite consolation of his caress, then she turned quickly and pushed him from her.

"Don't," she said. "It's all new to me still. I might weaken. I don't want to do any more harm."

She looked him steadfastly in the eyes for a moment, then took his face between her hands and kissed him on the mouth. The kiss seemed like a passionate

benediction, and she scarcely noticed that his lips lay unresponsive under hers.

" For the last time," she said. " For good-bye."

She pushed him gently from her, and passed her hand uncertainly across her forehead.

" Tanks, will you go, please? I don't think I can bear any more."

He stood looking down on her, on his face a vast, miserable perplexity.

" Joanna," he said, " we're both overwrought. We've tortured ourselves with our own imaginations. Listen; I don't accept your breaking of our engagement. Let us give ourselves time—time——" His voice trailed away.

She stood up and faced him squarely.

" Good-bye," she said simply, irrevocably. Then, as he did not move, " Oh, for God's sake please go! " she cried in agonised entreaty.

When she had heard the front door slam behind him she covered her face with her hands, and a long, convulsive shudder ran through her whole body. Then, she raised her face, haggard and deadly white, and, going quickly to the writing-table, as if she feared she might change her mind, she took a sheet of note-paper, and wrote a few lines in a firm, clear hand:

> " The marriage arranged between the Earl of Morries, of Carlyon Abbey, Hampshire, and Mrs. Joanna Fersen, of 100*a* Knightsbridge, will not take place."

She re-read it slowly, stamped and addressed it, and rang the bell.

"Take this at once to the post," she said to the footman.

CHAPTER XIV

THE broken engagement created a great excitement in the parrot-house, a chorus of chatter and comment. Speculation as to its cause ran riot. Had Joanna broken it off, or had Morries? Even to the cynical eye of the parrot-house they had been so obviously and overwhelmingly in love; the rupture must have had some very definite cause. Had Morries wearied? Had something cropped up about Joanna's past? When the parrot-house came to think of it, very little was known about her past. She was a widow, she said, and apparently had any amount of money. Was she a widow, and had she money? Anyhow, it was all very mysterious and thrilling, or would have been if only one knew a bit more, for the principals of the little drama were not giving themselves away. Morries was down at Carlyon shooting; Joanna was seen fairly often in the usual places, a little pale perhaps, but almost as cheery as usual.

For, though Joanna had more than once packed her trunks to depart, each time she had unpacked them again. She could not make up her mind to leave London, her whole being drowned in a great sea of inertia and lassitude. Sometimes she repeated to herself a maxim of Antonius: "If a tooth hurts you, have it out." She told herself that the only cure for

her soul-sickness was a drastic change of some kind, away from everything familiar, from everything that reminded her of her past happiness. She must take herself firmly in hand and start life again on a new basis. She dared not be alone, for when she was alone thought came to her, and memory to torture her. In the rattle and the racket of the parrot-house she found a drugged respite from the pain that would not give her rest. Also, though she would not admit it to herself, there was at the back of her mind, whenever she went out, the thought that she might get a glimpse of Tancred Morries with which to give a fresh edge to her unhappiness. Her misery moved in a kind of vicious circle, unbearable if she sat at home and thought of Morries, yet more exquisitely painful when she saw him in the flesh. Perhaps she feared most to be alone, for then sometimes she almost weakened, almost lost her pride, almost fell to imploring him to return to her at any cost, on any terms.

She had heard a rumour that Tancred was shortly going abroad to join his mother at Algiers, and it filled her with mingled relief and anguish. If he were out of reach she might find strength to bestir herself, to go away and try and forget. She felt utterly lonely, utterly alone. She thought of Antonius and his prophecy: "If it is not a happy love, it will be a devastating one." His remark was true in a sense he had not intended at the time. With normal women a broken love is at least a normal sorrow; between herself and her love walked a ghost.

She found a small measure of relief in physical exercise. Often she went for long walks in the various parks, trying to tire herself out, so that when she returned to her lonely house she should not think.

On one of these occasions, as she walked rapidly along the Serpentine in the gathering gloom of a December afternoon, she was conscious of footsteps that followed closely behind her. She ascribed it to chance, and paid no attention. The evening was not cold, it was yet two hours till dinner, and, dreading the return to her empty, dream-haunted house, she decided to sit for a while on a sheltered bench, and watch the lights of London as they sprang up in the distance, one by one. The following footsteps came level with her, but did not pass on. She looked up in idle curiosity. The light of a near-by lamp made a pool of brightness in front of her, by which she recognised the stolid face and figure of Jane Newton. They stared at each other in silence for a moment, till at last Mrs. Newton's eyes dropped.

"I followed you," she said awkwardly.

"So I see. Why?" Joanna's voice was cold.

"I don't know." The solid figure shuffled its feet.

A bitter intensity of resentment and hate rushed suddenly through Joanna at the sight of the woman who had deliberately wrecked her happiness.

"Have you come to gloat?"

"You hate me?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Of course. Why not?" The prominent eyes in

the square, unintelligent face stared at her with a kind of stupid bewilderment for a moment. Joanna was reminded of some farmyard animal faced with something it does not understand. The heavy voice, with its West Country burr, hesitated, then went on. "Of course you hate me. I hated you, too, but I don't any longer."

"Why did you hate me?" Joanna's answer was prompted by a venomous instinct to probe a wound of whose existence she was perfectly aware. She had been hurt, hideously hurt, and she wanted to hurt in return.

"*You* know!" Mrs. Newton's voice held the slight contempt a woman always feels for another woman who feints. Few women can take each other in; whatever their cast, kind, or colour, there is too great a similarity between their mental processes. A bush negress of Central Africa will understand any subtle one of us more quickly and completely than can our husbands or lovers, which is why our mutual conversations are either intensely confidential or utterly impersonal.

"*You* know!" repeated Jane Newton. "You knew the first day that we came to tea that I loved the Professor, and I knew that he loved you. It didn't matter to you then. But now you're sorry for yourself."

"What do you want to say all this for? Why did you follow me?"

"I—I don't know. I saw your face as I walked,

and I was glad! I wanted to tell you I was glad I had hurt you, and now I don't know whether I'm glad or not." The heavy face looked bewildered and slightly distressed.

"Why don't you know?"

"I haven't done any good, have I? To myself I mean, or to Him." She spoke the name of Antonius with capital letters, as if he were a deity. "And he is angry with me."

"Is he? Why?"

"Because I disobeyed him. I thought he would be glad, but he wasn't. It was because I disobeyed him." Her voice sounded like that of a hurt child. "It was not only because of him I hated you; I hated you because you were right and I was wrong, because you had everything and I nothing."

"Right? Everything? What do you mean?" Joanna had forgotten her anger in involuntary interest.

"You had everything—money and brains and your beautiful face; the sort of face that fools of men go mad for, and run after and do everything for. You were right to let him remake you. You had everything to gain. I had nothing to gain, nothing by coming back."

"I don't understand." Joanna's voice was gentler. "How was I right and you wrong? Aren't you glad of your youth?"

"Why should I be? What has youth given me? I don't know what you were before, but now you've got

everything; you can get everything with your silly baby face, and your money, and your fine-lady breeding. What have I got? If I had not met the Professor I might have been comfortably dead by now—I'm sixty-five. I might have been in heaven by now, or the other place, wherever my husband Will was, or my beautiful boy that was taken in France." The burring voice rang out in passionate sincerity, and the heavy face and figure seemed to have lost their ungainliness, their hint of caricature, and to have taken on a certain dignity. "God, I loved Will! He was a good man to me, and I fairly worshipped my beautiful Tony. Brown eyes he had, and curly hair, like his father when he courted me. They made me happy, the two of them, you wouldn't believe how happy, and after they'd gone I was lonely—so lonely that I could have died. There seemed nothing left, and I was only sixty then, and strong as a horse, and likely to live another twenty years or more. When I thought of those twenty years I fairly wanted to die. Then I met the Professor through a doctor friend down at home, and he talked—you know how he can talk—and he made everything seem different somehow, made me think that he could make me happy again by being young. I had been so happy it seemed I didn't know how to be unhappy. I *did* want to be happy again, so I let him. That pain—well, you know what it's like! And now, what is there left to me without my Will and my Tony. I don't mind the exhibiting business, not like Mr. Lowell does. It

doesn't seem to matter. But, then, he is gentry and I'm not. But what is going to happen to me? I don't need to work; I've got a bit of money, enough for all I want. I'm not used to all the fine-lady things like you. When I was old, all I wanted was a nice fire, and food, and a girl to wait on me a bit, and someone to chat to sometimes of an evening. But now I'm young, and have got to live another forty or fifty years. What can I do? I'm not likely to find another man like Will. There can't be two men like him in the world. I loved him. It wasn't like what I felt for the Professor; that was funny and all new to me, and now I'm frightened of it. It seems all wrong, somehow. But now, who will want me as I am? I'm not good-looking like you; I'm spoilt for the old life, and not like other women. What's the good of it all without my man Will and my boy Tony?"

Her voice broke in a hoarse sob. Joanna had forgotten her own bitterness and anger. For the first time she saw tragedy in the clumsy country woman, in the loneliness of her unnatural youth. She had not given her much consideration. Her passion for Antonius had seemed a trifle pathetic, but also a trifle ludicrous. That Jane Newton was satisfied with her new life and environment she had taken for granted, and had not realised the awful loneliness of a life with nothing to redeem it, without the strength of habit even to accommodate herself. She understood now, and understood, too, Jane Newton's hatred of herself, another anachronism but with superior advantages,

and how that hatred had set its poison working in the slow mind, plotting and perfecting its revenge.

" I'm sorry ; I did not know," she said gently. " If you knew it, you have no cause to hate me."

" I don't think I do now. You're one of us, one of the Professor's slaves. For that's what we are, and that's what he made us. What right had he ? It was not you I should have hated ; it was him, him that made a slave of an honest woman like me, and of fools like you and Mr. Lowell. I don't know, but I think I hate him for what he does down at the clinic. I hear some things, I can tell you. He doesn't know I hear them, but I do." Into her eyes crept a look of bucolic cunning.

" What sort of things ? "

" Oh, screams and things. Sometimes it's awful. He has got two of them in there, a man and a woman ; they're at the second stage of the pain. *You* know ! Poor creatures, they don't know what they're in for, and that they've sold their souls to the devil. It isn't right, Mrs. Fersen ; it isn't right."

" So you've discovered that too ? "

" Haven't I ! I hope my poor Will can't see from where he is now. The Professor, there'll be a judgment on him, a judgment, and I shouldn't be surprised if it was you."

" I ? What do you mean ? "

" Don't you know that you're killing him, Mrs. Fersen ? "

" Killing him ? How ? "

" Inch by inch. He is crazy about you, mad about you, and it's killing him. Haven't you noticed the difference in him? It isn't like an ordinary man gone on a woman ; it's like what the Bible calls a possession. There was a time when I envied you, when I wished that could be me—as if he'd have looked at me ! But now it frightens me. He seems all right when he's with people, though even then he takes little pleasure in showing himself off as he used to. All the pride's gone out of it for him. But when he's alone, sometimes it's awful to see him, the servants say. He's like an old man, all broken up. It's a wonder he isn't ill. And many a night I've heard him walking up and down, up and down, and sometimes he cries out, and swears and raves. It's a judgment on him, Mrs. Fersen, that's what it is."

Joanna shivered slightly, though the evening was not cold. The stolid figure in front of her, in its badly cut clothes, seemed no longer ludicrous or even hateful ; it seemed in some way an ominous, prophetic figure of doom, a sinister spirit that haunted a new world full of shadows. She rose to her feet, gathering her furs round her.

" I must go home," she said. " I'm glad we've had this talk. I admit that I felt bitter anger and resentment against you, that I hated you for wrecking my happiness, but I did not quite understand. I understand better now, and I'm sorry—oh, for a lot of things. Good night."

" Good night, Mrs. Fersen, and in a way I'm sorry

too. I don't believe you're any happier than the rest of us." She hesitated awkwardly. "Excuse the liberty, Mrs. Fersen, but may God have pity on you."

"And on us both."

The two women, one to all appearance so radiant and so fortunate, the other heavy, commonplace, one of the world's mediocrities, touched hands for a second, and like two wraiths met by chance in the darkness, disappeared from each other's sight.

When Joanna got back to her house the clock was striking seven, and she found Iris Bylaugh waiting for her in the drawing-room, squatting like a little gaudy idol on the hearthrug. She jumped up quickly as Joanna came in, and, with a demonstration of affection rare in her, took her in her arms and kissed her on both cheeks.

"I only got back from a series of visits to-day," she said, and hesitated. "I hope you don't mind my barging in. You must be sick of all the vultures swooping down on the dead body, and I hope I don't seem just another. But I'm awfully sorry about you and Tanks. I saw it, of course, in the papers."

"Thank you, dear old Iris."

"I saw Tanks lunching at the Berkeley to-day, and he looked like something buried and dug up, and you look as if you'd had a bit of a knock yourself."

"Yes, it's been a bit of a knock."

Iris threw her cigarette on the hearthrug, and stamped it out with the mannish air she affected on

the rare occasions when she felt shy or incapable of expressing herself.

" Can't be patched up, I suppose ? " she said casually.

" I'm afraid it's impossible. Absolutely impossible. Listen, Iris, old thing; if there was anyone in the world I could tell all about it, it would be you, but I just can't."

" Oh, I'm not a Nosey Parker. I didn't come here to pry. But it seems a pity ; you two seemed such a cert. Tanks not been a worm, has he ? "

" Absolutely the reverse, Iris. Please believe that. As for me, I do care what you think of me, though I don't about anyone else much. It's nothing scandalous or disgraceful. It was I who broke the engagement off. I just had to. Do you see ? "

" I don't see, but I'll pretend to. Anyway, if there's been any dirty work, it's not been you. You're the only clean woman in London, I've always said so, and Tanks has clean bones too. You poor little dears, I'm damned sorry about it all. I only barged in in case there was anything I could do."

" Bless you, Iris. The only thing you can do—and that would be doing a good deal—would be to get hold of Tanks and cheer him up."

" Me—cheer him up ? A fat lot he'd thank me for trying ! " There was a scornful note of bitterness in the young, self-assured voice.

" I think you're wrong. In fact, I know you are. Tanks is very fond of you."

" Fond of me ! I wish I could think so. . . . I

wish I could!" Iris uttered the last four words under her breath, but the whisper held an intensity that made Joanna look at her. To her stupefaction, she saw that big tears glittered under the girl's long eyelashes. She slipped down on the floor beside her, and took her by the shoulders.

"Iris, you care for him!" she said.

Iris did not answer.

"Iris, you care!" Her voice was insistent.

"Of course I do, you fool!"

"You always have?"

"Always have, damn him!"

"And you never told me?"

"Of course not. You were the bull's-eye."

Iris suddenly seemed to realise what she was saying. She shook her rumpled hair out of her eyes with an angry grunt. "Lord, what a cad I am, yapping like this when you—oh, Joanna, do hit me across the face, and tell me I'm a cad!"

There were tears, too, in Joanna's eyes.

"Iris, my darling Iris, it was I who was a cad, but I didn't know. You've been a wonderful sportsman. I hadn't the least idea. I thought you had turned him down because you didn't care about him. You've always snubbed him so."

Iris laughed sheepishly.

"That was my coy way! Can't hunt a man with a tomahawk."

"Try a new method."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, go in and win."

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"But—but you?"

"My dear, don't imagine that I have the makings of a Christian martyr, but as far as Tanks and I are concerned it's quite definitely, quite irrevocably, a wash-out, as you would call it."

"You—you wouldn't mind?"

"I hope you'll marry him. Don't let's talk about it any more, Iris dear. But let's have a cocktail."

When Iris had drunk her cocktail and departed, Joanna continued to sit in the half-light, staring into the fire. She tried to persuade herself that it had not cost her a pang to encourage Iris's forlorn hope, that it had not given her a sharp stab in the heart to see the new, half-believing softness in Iris's usually mocking eyes as she spoke of Tancred Morries. Everything between herself and Morries was absolutely at an end. She had brought him unhappiness that she longed to repair, yet she was not strong enough for the supreme sacrifice. She shivered as with cold at the thought of another woman in his heart. Her mind wandered to her conversation with Jane Newton in the park. She felt a queer fellowship with the wretched woman, hugging the memory of her husband and her son. Slaves they were both, slaves of their own rebellion against the laws of nature, slaves to the pride of a clever, unprincipled man. All these two years of her own triumphant youth she had looked

upon Antonius and his discovery with a benevolent eye, and had blessed him. Stripped now of her self-created glamour, with the example of his other victims before her, she recognised the cold-blooded deliberation and heartlessness of his schemes. She remembered the times when he had spoken of his early struggles; pride and ambition had been the keynote of his dreams to rule the world, to be the master of Life and Death. They had not been dreams of pity for suffering humanity. So had dreamed Perseus before he stole the fire from heaven. His so-called love for herself was not the normal love of a man and a woman. It was the monstrous passion of a tyrant, the craving of an impious creator for complete possession of the thing he has made; it was unholy. Three living Frankensteins dragged their misery through the world to gratify his pride, and it would not end there. She remembered what Jane Newton had told her of the two pain-wracked experiments now enduring torture in the clinic, buoyed up by false promises of happiness. Her mind conjured up a vision of others, and yet others, that he would "remake," doomed, poor monstrous Frankensteins, crimes against nature, to drag their unceasing, loveless misery through a world to whom they were a mockery and a repulsion.

For that the world, after its first stupefied thrill of curiosity had been gratified, had set its face against Antonius and his experiments was becoming more and more apparent. "It must stop!" was the

slogan of the most powerful and noisiest of penny papers. Even the more thoughtful of the monthlies and quarterlies were full of articles, signed by great names, urging the danger of such impious interference with the established laws of nature. The law disclaimed all recognition of any such new precedent; the Church had put a stranglehold on its flock.

"It must stop!" whispered Joanna to herself, and yet she knew that it would not stop as long as there were fools in the world—poor, desperate, credulous fools to be beguiled with false promises. Nothing could stop Antonius now, obsessed with his own power. Christ or Anti-Christ, he would not care as long as he could tread the world beneath his feet.

Yet, "It must stop!" whispered her brain, and her thought was echoed by Jane Newton, who called without warning, as she sat alone again over the fire after dinner.

"Excuse the liberty," said Mrs. Newton abruptly, shuffling her feet, as was her habit when thinking. "Since I saw you this afternoon I've walked and walked. Oh, it's not a new idea, but seeing you has brought it up again."

"What is it?" asked Joanna, with curiosity.

"It's this way. Me and you and Mr. Lowell are unhappy, and we're going to be worse so, and that's not the end of it. There are these two new ones, who will be out soon, and there'll be others—plenty of others, poor fools—all miserable, all wrong like us.

Because it is wrong. Where's it going to stop? Because it ought to stop ; even the papers say so."

" Well ? "

" Supposing we stopped it ! "

" But how ? "

" I haven't thought of a way yet, but I've got ideas." Once more over the florid face crept a look of heavy bucolic cunning. " The point is, if it could be done would you help? It ought to be stopped. The papers say so, and we know it. There's enough suffering in the world as it is."

" But, supposing it were possible, how would you propose to stop it ? "

" Oh, there are ways ! " The expression of cunning deepened. " Oh, I don't mean killing or anything like that, but he's balmy on you ; you could help."

" It must stop ! " Those three words had been buzzing like locusts all day at the back of Joanna's brain, but a subconscious instinct of loyalty to the man who had been her friend held her back.

" I'm sorry," she said, " but I'm afraid I can't help." Her tone was gentle but final, and she rose with a faint gesture of dismissal.

" Sorry I spoke," said Mrs. Newton, with apologetic obstinacy. " But I'm right, and if you don't see it now, you will soon."

She hesitated for a moment, then, with the same air of resigned obstinacy, stumped out of the room. Joanna was conscious of relief when she had gone.

"All wrong like us." She echoed Jane Newton's words under her breath as she went upstairs.

"All wrong, yes; but it was our own fault," her sense of justice whispered. "We were free agents; we were not coerced. As for those like us who will come, they are free agents too. It is not for us to consider what is right or wrong for them."

But yet, "It must stop!" whispered the other voice, the voice of sane humanity. She was whispering the words under her breath as, worn out with the conflicting emotions of the day, she fell into a heavy, dream-haunted sleep.

CHAPTER XV

THOUGH Joanna was leading a secluded life, rags and tags of gossip filtered into the Knightsbridge house from the outside world. Most of it was concerned with Henry Antonius, whose unpopularity grew daily. Public feeling had revolted against his discovery, and, above all, against his experiments. Apparently someone had talked—Joanna suspected Jane Newton—and ugly stories, for the most part grossly exaggerated, spread concerning dark practices said to take place in the clinic in Regent's Park, stories of screams in the night, of pain inflicted beyond human imagining, of fresh victims coerced against their own judgment.

It was largely the newspapers that did it. Carmelite House gave the lead, and one by one the others followed suit. They dwelt upon the chaos into which the world would be thrown by the intrusion of an element of ageless scientific *lusus naturæ*, of the inevitable upheaval of political, social, and family life. They touched also upon the religious aspect, and spoke in periods like the Book of Revelation. The Church and the law, encouraged by such powerful allies, redoubled their attacks.

Antonius, by his manners and his methods of meeting his opponents, did less than nothing to still the storm that was gathering. His manner in private, to friends

and foes alike, was arrogant and overbearing; in public he expressed his opinion, and his plans for the future drastic development of his powers, with contemptuous disregard for people's feelings and susceptibilities. He seemed reckless of the possibilities of failure or defeat, reckless of the consequences of his acts, drunk with his own power. Even his adherents in the parrot-house said that he was "overdoing it," that he was "a bit much to be swallowed." He looked ill, everyone said; he appeared to be consuming himself in some fire that burnt within. His manner, always rough and domineering, sometimes was confused, almost wild, and during a lecture he gave to a learned society he broke down completely. The papers spoke of ill-health, a sudden indisposition, and a rumour began to circulate in the parrot-house that he took drugs.

Next day it was known to everyone, and touched lightly upon in the newspapers, that one of his subjects under treatment at the clinic had died. The denizens of the Regent's Park area asserted that in the middle of the night the wailing figure of a woman, partially dressed but half hidden by blood-stained bandages, had rushed wildly through the quiet roads, and that dreadful, inhuman screams had torn the silent air before she had been caught and borne away by the clinic attendants. The explanation was simple; the woman had become delirious, had escaped the vigilance of her nurses, and exposure and hæmorrhage at the most critical phase of her treatment had brought about her death. But men began to turn an embarrassed

cold shoulder on Antonius when he put in an appearance in public, and women shrank from him.

It was announced in the papers one day that Lord Morries was among those who would shortly be leaving England to spend Christmas in the South. That afternoon Joanna, on her way home to tea, ran into him at the top of Sloane Street. Her heart was smitten with swift pity to see how ill he looked, how devoid of all his old buoyancy and high spirits. He was staring moodily down at the ground as he walked, but, happening to look up to dodge a passing pedestrian, he caught sight of her, and raised his hat with an embarrassed smile. On a sudden impulse she stopped him.

"I feel I must say au revoir," she said as he paused. "I see you're off to Algiers."

"Yes. Mother's been rather seedy lately." He broke off, still obviously embarrassed. "And you?"

"I haven't decided yet." She hesitated. "I'm just going home to tea; won't you come and tell me your news? I'm probably off to the Antipodes soon, so it'll be our last meeting."

He assented mechanically, and they walked in silence across the traffic of Knightsbridge. In the drawing-room, where tea was already laid, she threw off her hat, and forced herself to make small talk with an air of calm friendliness. They spoke of casual things—of the weather, of Christmas, and of their respective travels abroad. As the clock struck six he looked at his watch.

"Have a cocktail before you go," she said.

"It's been nice seeing you again, Tanks," she continued, as they sipped the golden liquid. While she spoke she told herself that in this casual interview she was testing her courage, trying to lay a ghost. "The world's conventions are stupid. Even though we have been engaged, there is no reason why we shouldn't be friends, even at a distance, is there?"

"None." He stared absently at the fire, then, jerking up his chin with a little gesture she remembered so well, he turned and faced her.

"We're talking like the parrot-house," he said. "Are you being sincere, Joanna? Because I'm not."

"What do you mean?"

"Are we being sincere in talking of our engagement as, well, just as the parrot-house talks? Has it meant nothing to you, all that we felt, and our split-up?"

"Tanks, don't let's rake it all up. It's our last meeting. Can't we let it go without a post mortem?"

"I can't. Because it's our last meeting there are a few things that must be said, because, whatever has happened, we've been more than just friends. I don't know how you've felt these last few weeks, but I've been through hell."

"Tanks dear, I'm sorry."

"Yes, it's been hell because—because it was all something I couldn't get hold of, so to speak. You must have been thinking me a pretty good specimen of a rotter, a faint-hearted lover, and so I was. I don't

think a decent chap would have felt as I did. Lord, how you must have despised me!"

"I didn't, Tanks, I swear, not even for a moment. I understood."

"That's more than I did. I thought and thought till I nearly went mad. I tried to worry everything down to its roots, but still I—I couldn't help myself. Time and again I started to write letters to you—oh, about all sorts of things. In most of them I told you that I was ashamed of myself, and that I begged you to forget it all and marry me."

"Did you?"

"Yes, but I tore them up. I meant every word of them, but yet, but yet——"

"Don't, Tanks. I know. You see, I've thought and thought too. The love of the old me still held a bit, and your reason told you that I was like other women, that I was—well, me, and good to marry. And then, when you believed, the other thing would come up like a ghost, your normal instincts revolted, and I seemed to you in some way monstrous."

"Don't, Joanna. You're cruel to yourself and to me."

"But it's true, isn't it? Don't try to spare my feelings, for I understand. It's true, isn't it?"

"I—I suppose so. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. It's that that has tortured me. I couldn't tell which was real. A better fellow wouldn't have wavered."

"I doubt it. A coarser nature might not have, for,

after all, he had 'the goods,' and wouldn't have the imagination to worry about the rest. You're a sensitive, and that's why I love you."

"Do you think so? You don't think we could have taken the risk?"

"I don't think so; I shouldn't have dared to chance it. You see, I love you too much. It would have been worse for me if I had seen you shrink from me, had seen repulsion in your eyes. Tanks, don't let's talk about it; it's still too painful. We've hurt each other, but not irrevocably. We've understood and we've forgiven each other. Let us forget it."

There was a long silence, while they both stared into the fire. Of what Morries thought she could not guess; for herself, she felt as if a half-healed wound had broken out afresh, and she blamed herself for having asked him into the house. She had believed her strength to be greater than it was; she trembled now in the knowledge of her own weakness. Five minutes ago or less she could have got him back, have taken the great risk, have staked a possible happiness on her own beauty and power to hold his heart through his senses, to drug him into forgetfulness. The temptation had been overwhelming, with him sitting so near her in the kind, familiar firelight. Her strained eyes fed themselves afresh on the face and voice she knew so well and so loved, on all the little remembered characteristics. He raised his eyes slowly to her face.

"You are wonderful," he said. "I only now realise

what, like a fool, I am missing through being a cowardly rotter. Why wasn't I drowned as a child, like a puppy? I'm sorry, Joanna. You're well quit of me. You deserve a better fellow."

She was silent.

"And here I am, as usual, talking about myself and my feelings. Won't you talk to me about yourself, Joanna?"

"What shall I say?"

"Of the last few weeks I haven't the nerve to ask. I have cut myself off from the right to. But of the future? Joanna, you're not looking fit. You don't like all this, the parrot-house and its life; you're too good for it. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I haven't made any definite plans. But I shall now. I shall probably go out of England for a long time, perhaps for good. I've no roots here—now; and I haven't seen much of the world. There's a big world to see, and I've a long time to see it in." In spite of herself, a desolate note crept into her voice, a note of loneliness that filled him with sudden pity. He slipped on to the white hearth-rug at her feet, and timidly touched her hand.

"Joanna!"

"Oh, I'm not too sorry for myself. I've still got a lot of things, and there is a great deal I can do for other people as well as myself."

"But you're beautiful, you're—young." They both winced a trifle at the last word. "You can't live on travelling and good works."

" Things will shape themselves."

" You will—marry ? "

" Possibly."

His face contracted a trifle.

" I hope you'll find a real good fellow, and be happy."

" Thank you." She paused. " Henry Antonius has asked me to marry him." The last few words came out in spite of herself, born of a woman's sudden desire to hurt even the thing she loves when she herself is in pain, as a dog in a trap bites the hand of its master.

" Antonius ! Good God ! But you wouldn't ? "

" I don't know. I might." Her own pain was so great—all the greater because of Morries's nearness, because of her need for self-control—that she felt a savage desire to shock, to hurt.

" But you couldn't, Joanna ! You mustn't ! "

" Why not ? "

" Well, I know he was a great friend of yours and all that, but the man's such a bounder, such a poisonous cad. I used to think that it might be merely jealousy on my part that I instinctively disliked him, but now even you must see that I was right. He has proved it himself. I'm not just talking of the newspaper and parrot-house stuff, but one's seen for one's self. The man's half mad, I think ; he's scarcely human these days. One never knows what fresh devilry he may not do. Your life would be a hell."

" Perhaps not. He loves me."

" Love ! That blackguard ! The word is a sacrilege from him. He and you—makes me sick to think of."

"Why? As you say, I'm young, in a way, and it isn't every man who would marry me if he knew. We know that, don't we, Tanks?" Her tone was cool and conversational, but in her heart was a raging misery.

"Joanna, don't! Though heaven knows I deserve it. If it were anyone else—but Antonius! Joanna, please say you won't."

"I don't know; I only said I might. He knows, and doesn't mind." Joanna didn't know why she kept repeating this assertion, of which she had no conviction; she was only conscious that to hurt in some degree lessened the pain in her own heart.

Morries stared at her, noticing, in spite of, or because of, his emotion, that she looked almost superhumanly lovely, with the red glow of the firelight on her white face and flaming hair, her eyes dark and luminous with pain. She, too, was strung up with emotion, and her whole person seemed vibrant with a magnetic current that communicated itself to him, and stirred him in every pulse and fibre.

"He knows, and he doesn't care, doesn't he? Blackguard as he is, for that at least I respect him."

She glanced at him with surprise at the new, hard note in his voice, and the sudden light in his eyes.

"Joanna, tell me you won't marry Antonius. Listen, Joanna, I'm asking you. Will you marry me?"

Her hands clutched the arms of her chair, and her breath came in quick gasps.

" Marry you, Tanks? You're mad! "

" I'm not mad. I repeat it. Will you marry me? "

She sat quite still for a minute, and the knuckles of her hands stood out, bony and white in the firelight. She took a long breath.

" No," she said, " I won't."

" Why? "

" Must you, Tanks? Well, you remember the photograph Jane Newton showed you? " She looked at him intently till she read assent in his eyes. " That's why. Think it over."

He returned her stare, tight-lipped.

" Oh, God! " The sound came from him like a groan, and she resisted the sudden longing to put out her arms to console. He continued to stare at her, and the light in his eyes deepened, grew harder, till she shrank from it with a faint sense of uneasiness.

" Don't look at me like that, Joanna! " he said in a low, tense voice. " It's driving me mad."

" Why? I don't understand."

" It's driving me mad," he repeated breathlessly. " You're driving me mad. What are you, a woman or a vampire, a siren or a withered hag? I don't know, and, God forgive me, but I don't think I care, for you're killing me, I tell you."

He started forward, and she shrank back.

" Tanks, what is it? " she cried.

" You, that's all! " His voice was hoarse and breathless. " I can't get you out of my mind; you've

haunted me all these weeks. I tried everything to get rid of you, but I couldn't. I've thought of you as you were, and I've felt repulsion ; I've conjured up a ghost with withered skin, and shrunken limbs, and toothless jaws, and I've thought of your beautiful face and body, your damnable beauty, and I've wondered what I've done that a devil should be sent out of hell to torture me. And I've thought of all your sweetness, and then of the months you've spent in Antonius's Chamber of Horrors. And between it all you've nearly killed me. I've hated you, and I've dreaded you, and I've shrunk from you, and yet all the time I wanted you. Never shall I be able to love a woman again, because I can't get you out of my blood. But what does it matter, anyway? What does it matter what you are, for you're the most beautiful thing on earth—beautiful enough to drive a man as mad as you've driven me. And you want me as I want you. If it's love or hate, I don't know and don't care, but I want you."

He tried to take her in his arms, but she shrank back, holding him at arm's length.

"Tanks, don't, don't!" she cried. "Don't humiliate me so. You don't mean it ; it isn't you. You've loved me, and you don't love me any more ; so be it. It's been said. If you're feeling sore and desperate, so am I. Don't let's make it all sordid and hideous, unforgettable."

"Unforgettable! You've done that for me." Morries, after weeks of strain and unhappiness, was

scarcely conscious what he said, beside himself with pent-up misery. "You've just about killed me, and you want me to forget it! But there is one thing you've forgotten yourself, and that is that, whatever you are, you are more beautiful and desirable than any normal woman. There is not much left in life for either of us, it seems to me. Let's take what we can and forget the rest. Joanna, you beautiful, damnable thing, I want you!"

He seized her in a grasp that not even her strength, born of fear and horror, could fight. He had his arms close about her, and was smothering her face and throat and hair with fierce kisses. She felt sick with humiliation and disillusion. The sordid struggle lasted but a minute. His foot caught in the head of the white bearskin rug, and the slackening of his muscles as he regained his balance gave her her opportunity to slip with a quick twist out of his arms.

The slight jar brought him to his senses. She faced him silently, with a world of unhappiness and dreadful reproach in her wide eyes. The profound sadness of them seemed to strike to the roots of his being. The thwarted passion in him turned slowly, through regret and self-disgust, to an abasement of shame. Looking at her eyes, it seemed to him that he had killed a small, defenceless thing. He could only stand and look at her, mutely begging forgiveness with his eyes. The feverish, surcharged atmosphere of the pretty room seemed suddenly to have turned to the stagnant stillness of a mortuary. She did not move, but her

face and lips were so pale that for a moment he thought she was going to faint.

At last, with an effort, he broke the unbearable silence.

" Joanna," he said, in a slow, dead voice, " I can't expect you to forgive me yet, but I hope you will some day. I wish I could have died an hour ago. God, I wish I had ! "

He took a step towards her, looking at her with faint, hopeless inquiry. Mechanically she put out her hand. He touched it lightly, and, without looking at her, turned and went slowly out of the room. Down in the hall he paused uncertainly; at his feet lay a small grey glove she had dropped when they came in. Looking round in the same dazed way, he picked it up, kissed it with a kind of timid reverence, and laid it on the hall table. Joanna did not see the gesture, for scarcely had the door closed behind him when she had thrown herself on the low divan and burst into a paroxysm of hard, painful weeping.

Downstairs, Morries picked up his hat and went out into the street. Though the rain was pouring heavily, he did not notice it, and, looking neither to right nor to left, started to cross the muddy street.

" Tanks, you lunatic ! "

He looked round stupidly into the face of Iris Bylaugh, who had just emerged from the Hyde Park Hotel.

" You moonstruck idiot, that taxi nearly got you." She looked intently into his face in the uncertain light.

"What's the matter, Tanks?" Her tone was unusually gentle. He looked at her unseeingly.

"I—I don't know. I—I think I've gone mad. I—I wish I had died an hour ago."

She put her hand through his arm with rough, warm sympathy.

"I've felt like that myself," she answered. "It's pretty bloody awful. You're not fit to be out alone. Come round to my place and have a drink."

Upstairs in the shadowy drawing-room Joanna rose slowly from the divan. The tears had dried on her face, but the short fit of sobbing had failed to relieve her, and she thought that she suffered as no one had ever suffered before. For there was humiliation mixed with her pain—a bitter humiliation. She pressed her teeth into her lip as she thought of that ignoble struggle with Morries. She had been unhappy before, dreadfully unhappy, all these long weeks, but always her ideal of Morries had remained unsmirched. Now he had shattered it, he had humiliated her. She could still feel the violence of his kisses, and she brushed her hand across her face and throat, as if to brush away something unclean that had touched her. She tried to make allowances for him and his overwrought nerves, and to tell herself that many other men might have felt and done the same. But that Morries should, of whom she had made an idol! The last drop was added to the cup of her bitterness.

"Oh, God, why did I do it?" she whispered to herself. She was thinking of her pact with Antonius on

the ship. She was well paid out for tampering with forbidden things. All her life it would be her enemy, the damnable beauty that inflamed men, and that she had once treasured and rejoiced in. For the moment she envied Jane Newton, whose mediocrity at least kept her free from the pitfalls of the emotions. She longed to become old and ugly, normal and at peace. But the reflection of her own face in the long glass opposite taunted her. In spite of tear-stained face and dishevelled hair, the reflection that looked back at her was infinitely lovely, and her slim body in its attitude of abandon was seductive and desirable.

A sudden idea came to her, and she sat with her chin on her hands, thinking hard, till the footman came to ask if he should serve dinner.

"Yes, bring it in; I'm ready. I'm not changing; I'm going out after. By the way," she called after him, "tell Hodges to ring up Professor Antonius at his house, and ask if he can see me between nine and ten this evening. Tell him it's urgent."

. . . . . .

Though absorbed in her own emotions, she was shocked at the appearance of Antonius when she went into the warmth of the over-scented room. She had not seen him since her last interview in this same room, and had not put much belief in the rumours she had heard about the change in him. It was not only that he looked ill, but it seemed to her that about his whole being there was a new stamp of deterioration

and degradation. Where before he had been pleasantly solid, dignified, a shade portly, he was now puffily fat, and his skin was of a flabby yellow texture. The sunken, feverish eyes and heavily lined face spoke, not only of sleeplessness and ill-health, but of excess of some kind, and his manner was jerky and strained. She did not think that he had been drinking, but it was quite evident that he was mildly under the influence of some drug—only slightly so, but probably permanently.

Though he tried to summon up a smile of greeting, his expression was sullen and a little defiant. As he shook hands he looked at her with admiration—not the frank, deferential admiration he had been used to show, but with a boldness and a possessive quality that embarrassed her, as if she were suddenly conscious of being insufficiently clothed. But her own thoughts were too absorbing to leave room in her mind for fear or perturbation. When she had accepted a cup of coffee and a liqueur, she went straight to her point, speaking with the abrupt emphasis of conviction.

"Henry," she said, "I can't bear it any more."

"What can't you bear?" Under lowered lids he shot her a quick, furtive glance of inquiry that held a faint gleam of triumph.

"Myself. Everything. Life is hell. I needn't go into details, but I can't bear it any longer. Did you know it all, foresee it all, I wonder, when you first approached me? You must have, I think, and you didn't care. Admit, if you like, that it's all my own

fault, but you made me as I am, and it's partly your responsibility."

"What is my responsibility?"

"From whatever motive you did it doesn't matter for the moment, but through you I am what I am, young when I ought to be old, with all the problems of a long life instead of a short one before me, and unfitted to deal with them because I'm—different. I have a terrible handicap that other women haven't got, a handicap that will for ever prevent me from living a normal life, whatever I do, whatever corner of the world I hide myself in, unless I live a lie, a lie that will be very difficult to keep up, as we know already. Living that lie has made me bitterly unhappy already, and if I don't continue to live it I shall be a pariah in the eyes of the world, a thing to be stared at, an object of curiosity, ridicule, or sometimes even disgust. Some people mightn't mind, but, Henry, I can't bear it. I'm tired of living. I can't bear it, I tell you!" The self-control she had imposed upon herself was wearing thin, and her voice broke. "Henry, can't you help me?" Big tears stood in her eyes as she looked imploringly at him.

"But, my dear girl, what can I do, even if I wanted to? You went into it with your eyes open, you must remember."

"With my eyes open, yes—as much open as those of a man stricken with a mortal illness who snatches at a cure. What did I, with the life I had led, know of the world, and what its problems would be to a person

like myself? Oh, I admit that it is all my own fault, that I was a blind, egotistical fool, feeding myself on illusions. That doesn't make it any better now. Can't you, for old friendship's sake, help me?"

"But, I repeat, how? Are you asking me to put you in a lethal chamber?"

"With your science, can't you do something? I'm not asking for fresh miracles; I only want to be old again, and inconspicuous, and *normal*—oh, normal, to know that I am what I am, however decrepit and ugly, and not a horrible travesty, a walking lie. I'm not just a soulless doll, to revel in my good looks and the effect they have on people, and what they can get me. I'm a live human being to whom humanity is denied. Henry, it was a dreadful thing you did when you took it upon you to tamper with God's handiwork. I and the others, you have remade our bodies, but you have killed our souls. The harm you have done, can't you undo it? Can't you take back the youth, the cruel travesty of youth you gave me, and let me be old again? Henry, I want to be old again, as I was before you got hold of me. Make me old again—oh, can't you make me old?" She was imploring him with her eyes and voice, while the tears poured down her face.

"Make you old again? That is a curious request." Antonius appeared quite unmoved; even he smiled sardonically.

"Oh, can't you understand, can't you see? You could have once, before you lost your own humanity,

when you were the dear friend I used to know. And, even if you can't see, won't you do it all the same, because I implore you for the sake of our old friendship? Won't you undo a little of the harm you've done? Henry, let me be old again; make me old."

"Joanna, I couldn't if I wanted to."

"Do you mean it, or are you only saying it to punish me? Is there nothing you could think of—nothing? I'll face any risk."

"My dear girl, it's utterly impossible. Nature, by her own law, can progress, not retrogress. My treatment is based on the laws of nature. I have set the clock back; I cannot put it on again. Please believe for once that I say what I know to be the truth."

"You swear it?"

"I swear it."

Joanna stared before her in silence.

"You have dealt me worse than a death-blow," she said at last, in a flat voice. "So be it. I've got to go through with the penalty of my own folly." Again she paused. "So much for me. But there are the others, those poor fools who are to come. Won't you spare them, Henry?"

"What do you mean?"

"Those poor fools who will come to you in their ignorance, begging for false youth. You've seen what misery your work produces—Jane Newton, Lowell, and you've a fine object-lesson in me. You must see

by now how infinitely more harm than good your work brings forth. Won't you stop now, Henry? "

"Stop when my life's work is only just beginning, when I've only shown to the world a particle of what I can do, when the world is still but half convinced, when it is still fighting me? You're mad, Joanna."

"A particle of what you can do? God help humanity if you can do more. Aren't you satisfied with what you've done? You've done an astounding thing, it's true; you've made the scientific discovery of the century. You've proved your theory. Isn't that enough? You, with your genius, can win even greater laurels with other things—kind, merciful things instead of cruel ones. Won't you stop this horror? "

"You're talking like a child, my dear. Do you imagine that I'm going to give up my fight before it is half done? What do the sufferings of a few fools matter in a work like mine? "

"And that was all your dream, Henry, the lust for power, to ride like a juggernaut over an already suffering world? "

"Put it that way if you like. The world showed me little of its mercy when I was weak; why should I show it now I am strong? And I am going to be stronger. The primitive law of brute force is over. The law of brain-power, of science, is the law of the future, and I'm going to control that law, and, through that law, the world." Antonius's voice had lost its

personal note, was harsh with intensity, and, obsessed by his unholy dream, his face glowed with fanatical light. "The law of life and death, I've conquered that, and there is no limit to what I can do, I tell you, no limit. Think it out. I have the power of life and death in the hollow of my hand; it will make me greater than emperors, or parliaments, or armies; it will make me the power that rules the world." His voice shook with a passionate conviction, his face had turned darkly red, and swollen veins stood out on his forehead. Joanna, looking at the feverish glitter in his eyes, listening to the exaggeration of his words, wondered whether the seething obsession within him had not touched his reason, and whether he were entirely sane.

"Hands red with the blood of your victims," she murmured. "But I was not thinking of myself only. I wish I could be the sacrificial lamb for the other poor devils. There is nothing that can stop you?"

"Nothing, I tell you, not even yourself." The red light was still in his eyes as he looked at her. "Once, perhaps, you might have. I was weak then as a love-sick schoolboy, and did not know my own strength. I used to ask; now I can take when I so choose." He looked at her under bent brows, and something in his expression filled her with sudden fear.

"What do you mean?"

"What I said, little lady. I have told you many

times, haven't I, that I always get what I want? And you know that it is you that I want more than anything in the world—more than the world's mastery, perhaps. I also told you just now that a short time ago I might have given it all up for you. Now I intend to have both."

She stared at him with mingled horror and amazement. Though his voice was calm, almost measured, the dark face that looked close into hers, transfigured by an ugly, triumphant smile, was assuredly, she told herself, not that of a sane man. She must not show apprehension, nor lose her self-possession. With a strong effort of will she beat down a sickening sense of fear.

"What do you mean?" she repeated calmly.

"Again what I say, or, to put it more gracefully, that you are going to be the crown of my world triumph."

"And how?"

"I put it to you that, if you do not consent to marry me, I will announce to the world certain facts concerning you—in short, that you are one of my 'experiments.'"

Her face betrayed no emotion; only her eyes dilated a trifle.

"You would do that?"

"Why not? It is my last card, and I play it. I should not have played it unless you had forced me. I've tried every other means while I held it in reserve." His eyes blazed in their deep sockets, but his voice was

smooth, almost gentle. "I don't know how my suggestion strikes you, but you are displaying an admirable composure. And let me add that it is a wise one, for there is no use exhausting yourself in an attempt at resistance. For once and for all, I mean what I say. I'm sorry to have to deliver so harsh an ultimatum, but the desperateness of my love has made me resort to desperate measures. I should have preferred to have wooed you with love-words and caresses, but you leave me no option. But that will come later." To Joanna's sick senses his voice had a horrible purring sound, as that of a great cat that licks its lips.

"I do not wish to hurry you. To-morrow I go to Berlin for a week to lecture. On my return I shall expect my answer. Just think it over quietly at home. If you do not answer, I shall make my announcement. It will create a great stir. 'The beautiful Mrs. Fersen, one of Antonius's experiments!' It will create a sensation all over the world almost! You will be a famous personage. Your face, through its striking beauty, is already known wherever there is a picture paper. It will become even better known; in fact, you will attract attention in whatever corner of the world you may elect to go. It will be my supreme triumph of advertisement. . . . Or you will marry me. Just think it over by to-day week."

She did not answer, but rose from her chair, gathering her wraps round her. He rose also, standing in front

of her, forcing her eyes to meet his in a steady stare. She resisted a wild desire to scream aloud, to spit in his face, and with the same indolent, almost insolent calm, went slowly out of the room and out of the house.

CHAPTER XVI

THOUGH she had forced herself to keep up a show of indifference before Antonius, and though at the time she had been strung up to such a pitch of anger and astonishment that she had scarcely taken in the full sense of his words, Joanna was in a state bordering on panic by the time she reached home. Later, when a little calm had returned to her, she was surprised and half ashamed at the terror with which his threats had filled her. Before the interview she had sincerely believed that with the ending of her engagement to Morries, and more especially after its ugly sequel of the afternoon, life to her as a thing that really mattered was at an end, that she really did not much care what happened. All she wanted was to sink into oblivion, to get through the empty years as quickly as might be. But youth is not so easily shattered, and itself is its own anodyne. Love might be finished for her, but there yet remained the life of every day, of habit so deeply rooted in all of us that, however unhappy, we shrink from losing it.

Not for a moment did she contemplate the possibility of marrying Antonius, but yet the alternative appalled her. She felt she could not bear the publicity. As he had said, she was too well known, too noticeably good-looking, to escape attention. Wherever she

went, whatever she did, whatever name she took, the miserable story would follow her in a longer or shorter time. To shake it off she would move from place to place, vainly seeking oblivion, for ever denied rest. Everywhere people would whisper, or she would imagine it, and would shrink from her, or insult her as Tancred had done; would laugh, or, worse still, pity her. She tried to take herself to task for pettiness and vanity and false pride. After all, there were good and kind people in the world, and there was infinite useful work to be done. But it was of no use; at present she could see no light.

"I just couldn't bear it, I couldn't bear it," she repeated over and over to herself. "I'd rather die, die——"

She paused suddenly, while the grisly idea took root. Why shouldn't she die? Death was easy enough to achieve, and she had no very deep-rooted religious feeling to make her fear the hereafter. If Antonius carried out his threat, there would be little left to make the burden of living worth while. She had no kith or kin, few real friends, no one was dependent on her, and she shamefacedly recognised that there was not in her the stuff of which martyrs or heroines were made. She was an ordinary woman, with an ordinary woman's weaknesses, and she would not be able to endure. Sooner or later she would kill herself, she was certain. Why not now, before she had known the full bitterness of humiliation?

"What would be the sin?" she asked herself. "Why would it be wrong?"

There remained the possibility that Antonius had been bluffing, that he had only meant to frighten her, and that he did not mean to carry out his threat. It was at least a forlorn hope. She read in the morning papers of his departure to Germany. He would be back on Saturday, and on Sunday he would require his answer. She had nearly a week's grace, and anything might happen in a week. She would not do anything until she had seen him again. She thought of the possibility of suicide quite coolly, and without fear. She had about come to the end of her endurance, but yet the habit of life, however worthless, clings to us. If he had been bluffing, well and good; if not, she would kill herself. She had worked herself into a state of unnatural exaltation, and self-murder seemed to her a mere episode, a gamble.

But her state of self-induced tranquillity was rudely shaken three days later by a short paragraph in the morning paper, at the end of half a column based on an interview with Antonius on the subject of his sensational success in Berlin.

> "It is asserted," it ran, "that one of the victims of Professor Antonius, Anti-Christ or charlatan, is a lady well known in London society for her beauty and accomplishments. It is further said that we may expect some sensational disclosures on the Professor's return from the German capital."

Panic returned to Joanna a hundredfold. Undoubtedly the first part of the paragraph referred to herself; the ambiguity of the last part haunted her. "Sensational disclosures." That suggestion was evidently prompted by Antonius himself. Was it accidental, or was it a veiled threat? She put her hands to her head, as if to pluck away the nightmare of uncertainty and dread. Antonius meant to carry out his threat. He had not been bluffing. He was ruthless, obsessed by his belief in his own omnipotence, pride maddened, lost to honour. Catching sight of her face in the mirror, she cursed the beauty that had led her into such a quandary.

She was still tormenting herself with her own imagination when Lowell called on her late that afternoon. She had not seen him to speak to since, through Jane Newton, he had learnt the truth about her, and with a new timidity she glanced at him furtively, as if to detect any signs of shrinking or disgust, but they were not there. His gentle brown eyes gazed at her with all their old air of deferential devotion, but with an added hint of determination and decision.

"I see you've seen that damnable interview," he said, as they sat down, pointing to the newspaper that lay open at the leading page. She nodded. "Because it was prompted by him, of course; it wasn't accidental."

"Of course." She smiled grimly, and he hesitated.

"Excuse me of talking of things if it pains you," he said, and paused.

" It doesn't ; I'm beyond it." A little of the bitterness she felt crept into her voice, and he looked at her as if longing, but not daring, to express sympathy.

" I—I can believe it. Again excuse me, if I'm butting in ; I don't mean to be impertinent, but it is not very difficult for me to guess something of the underlying motive of that paragraph. For it is an ultimatum of some kind, isn't it ? "

" Yes, an ultimatum ; a sequel to—to something that happened last Sunday. Oh, I may as well be frank with you. It's just that by next Sunday, if I don't promise to marry him, there will be ' sensational disclosures.' "

" The day after to-morrow ! And what are you going to do ? "

" I don't know—yet."

" Yet ? What do you mean by that ? You're not going to marry him ? "

" No."

" You mean to go through with it ? "

" No."

" Then what——? I see. You, too, have thought—— Joanna—I beg your pardon—you can't ! Not you ! "

" Why not ? "

" Because—because—oh, my dear, forgive me, but I must say it—because I love you."

She stared at him open-eyed.

" You love me ? And you *know* ? "

" And I ? " He shrugged his shoulders.

" You're a man ; it seems different somehow."

" And you're the dearest and most wonderful woman in the world. If it hadn't been for this "—he pointed to the newspaper—" I should have never dared tell you. But I love you ; I have worshipped you ever since the first day I came here in fear and trembling, and you were sweet to me, and did not seem to mind my being—what I am. But I never thought I should dare tell you. Listen, Joanna, before you start to put me in my place. Before I came here to-day I didn't know how things were with you, what you were going to do, what you felt. But now—well, it's the worst. You, too, have thought of suicide. I have, too, but hadn't the courage. Rather than that, won't you come away with me ? "

" Come away with you ? "

" Won't you marry me, Joanna, and come away with me out of all this ? Oh, it sounds like the dream of a presumptuous fool, I know ; I should never have dared say it but for all this. Listen, Joanna, for a moment. I know about your engagement to Lord Morries, and that it is ended—Jane Newton talked, you know—and I know a little of what you must be feeling, and that you can't possibly care anything about me. I ask for nothing ; I expect nothing now or at any time. It would be enough to love you, and to keep my love to myself, and to protect you and to take care of you and serve you. You can't die ; you mustn't ! You won't be able to bear it when Antonius has—talked. I can protect you from the worst—I swear it—and it would be the one supremely wonderful thing in my life. It

would make life worth living. We could go very far away, where the world couldn't reach us, where no one would know about us, and I'd just be your slave. Won't you, Joanna?"

"Oh, my dear, you are too wonderful, but I can't."

"But you're not angry?" His anxious brown eyes searched her face.

"Angry! I'm overwhelmed with your wonderfulness."

"Don't answer me now, if you don't want to. I have rushed things, but it was—this, and what you said. Just think about it, and remember, not that I love you, if that worries you, but that I worship you as a dog does its master, and that the only thing worth while in life to me is if I could serve you. Do you know that when I, too, thought of suicide, it was you, I think, that kept me from it, the thought that I might be able to help you in some way, in all this horror?"

"Horror? Yes, it's that, isn't it, for us both?"

"For us both. God, I've cursed the day Antonius found me, haven't you?"

"A hundred times in the day. We snatched at hope, and what's left?"

"Not much for either of us—not even a safe and respected old age."

"But for you is there nothing? What about your work, the invention that you dreamed of completing?"

"It is valueless. It was the maundering dream of an old man. It is not worth completing. No, even that's

been taken from me. The whole damnable sin and sacrifice has been wasted."

"My dear, I'm sorry! What a tragedy!"

"My own besotted fault. My own blindness and vanity."

"As mine."

"Yes, we've both learnt our lesson when it's too late. But can't we help each other, Joanna?"

"I don't think so. That's the awfulness of people like us; we're each so horribly alone. We're abnormal, and each one of us must live with our own horror."

"You think that now, Joanna dear; so did I once. Now I can't feel it, because, oh, my dear, I love you so. That gives me a reason to go on living. Joanna, don't turn me down completely. The thought of you is the only thing that keeps me alive in this ghastly world that I've made for myself. Let me go on imagining that there is something worth living for." Tears stood in her eyes.

"Don't," he said unhappily. "Don't cry. Selfish swine that I am, I've made you cry, I who would die to save you a tear. Joanna, don't think about it; just only think that I'm here when you want me, if ever there is anything I can do. But I won't talk about it any more. There's something else. We spoke of help. If we can't help each other, can't we —can't we perhaps help others?"

"Others? Who?"

"The others who will come after us, fools like us, who don't know what a hell they're laying up for

themselves. For they'll keep on coming as long as Antonius keeps out of prison, no matter what the papers and the bishops say."

"I've thought of that. I've tried Antonius. Even I've offered in exchange—anything he wanted."

"And he?"

"He wants both. I don't think he is quite sane these days."

"He is not. I know it. He is mad with his own pride and power, with his greed and his impious obsession, and with his own lust. I've seen a good deal of him lately, and I know. He treats me like a dog these days, with worse than insult, though that is nothing. Once he had infinite power for good, and it has been too much for him. He was too gross, under all his thin veneer of civilisation. The lust and the insensate pride in him have withered all the good. Even the spirit of science has curdled. Success has killed his balance; it will kill his reason before long, perhaps his sanity. He is consuming himself with his own imaginings; now he is dangerous as a mad dog at large is dangerous. Nothing but a crime that would send him to penal servitude would check him in his vile career, and he is clever and will probably dodge the law. The only blow that could hurt him must come from within. Couldn't we do it, Joanna?"

"How?"

"I don't know yet, but should consider anything justifiable. It might entail the sacrifice of oneself, of one's life, but it would be doing a service to humanity.

For a long time the conviction has been growing up in me. Remember, I live in the same house, and have learnt something of his insensate plans for the future. To stop him I would take any risk, and if it necessitated crime, even, I think it would be forgiven in Heaven. And, even if it were not, what is one soul lost against the hundreds, perhaps thousands, that Antonius will assuredly kill? "

"A crime? What do you mean? We could not kill even him." Her voice sounded frightened.

"No, we couldn't. Not even him. But we might kill his power, the secrets of it, the impedimenta that he has spent his life in finding and making."

Joanna looked at him intently. His usually gentle brown eyes were ablaze with the fire of his conviction. It was clear that he meant what he said, that it was the result of long thought. She had not known that the nervous, sensitive creature had in him the possibility of so much ruthlessness and concentration. But the iron had entered into his soul, as it had into hers and into Jane Newton's. She reflected with a wry smile that it would be a kind of poetic justice that Antonius should be scotched by the lost souls he had driven into revolt.

"The secrets of his power," she repeated. "But how could it be done? "

"I haven't thought yet. Jane Newton has tried to talk to me, but so far I have refused to listen. She hates Antonius now as much as she was once infatuated. For a while she hated me because I was angry with her

for what she did to you, but a common misery has drawn us together again. Antonius treats her abominably, too, now we are no further use to him. He is sending her away somewhere. She is desperate, poor devil. I have only stayed on so as to be in touch with you, but it has got to end somehow, some time, and when the moment comes, I'm ready for it. I don't care what happens after."

"What happens? What do you mean?"

"Oh, not what you imagine. As long as you are within reach my life is no longer my own, Joanna. It is yours. But that's forbidden ground. For the other—well, I've told you. Things might happen suddenly. And you?"

"I—I don't know. I must think." She brushed her hand across her forehead with a gesture of weariness. "Oh, I'm so tired with thinking."

He made a quick, instinctive movement, as if to console her, then pulled himself up. A few minutes later he rose to go.

"The powers of evil," he quoted in a half-whisper as he reached the door. "If it comes, Joanna, are you with us, we three victims?"

"I—I don't know."

She stared at the door that he had closed behind him for a long time, after he had gone, with an expression of bewilderment mingled with fear. Slowly Lowell's words sank into her tired brain and took root there. They had been spoken in no mere spirit of revenge or sudden anger, but with the deep intensity

of conviction. He would consider even a crime justifiable, he had said. It had taken a great deal to force the ordinarily patient, almost timid man to such strong utterance. Was he right? Worn out by her own unhappiness, Joanna was incapable of judging; she only knew that she agreed with him, that something, anything, must be done to stop Antonius's Juggernaut of sufferings.

"It must stop!" Over and over again the words repeated themselves in her brain. Her head ached abominably, throbbing till it dulled coherent thought. She told herself that she must stop thinking, must take rest and give herself a chance for cool reflection, but she could not. All night she lay awake tossing and turning, her head on fire, while confused, wild thoughts raced madly through her brain. Towards morning she fell into a half doze, haunted by nightmares. She seemed to see Antonius in the form of a great, black, inchoate monster, with long, clawed fingers tipped with blood, that licked its lips as it crouched, watching her, and she saw that under its huge, misshapen feet lay the mangled bodies of dead men and women, and of men and women but half dead, who begged with pain-harsh voices for release; and that in one of the bloodstained hands was a sharp curved scalpel. And she seemed to see, too, that a shadowy hand slowly, very slowly, guided the scalpel, till it was turned towards the left breast of the monster, who, unnoticing, licked its lips, and emitted a harsh purring sound like that of a great cat. And in the

background, gradually growing clearer, were the shadowy faces of herself and Jane Newton and Lowell. "It must stop!" a low voice seemed to murmur in her ear, over and over again. Her whole being leapt up in answering assent, yet something seemed to hold her back from some definite action, a lurking fear from which she desperately strove to free herself.

When she woke late, with a pale winter sunshine streaming in at the window, she was, if possible, more tired than when she went to bed, with aching head and heavy eyes, so that the faithful Hodges exclaimed in alarm, and tried to dissuade her from getting up. She went through the routine of the next two days mechanically, performing the little ordinary acts of every day as if she were unconscious of what she did. Her brain was a turmoil of incoherent thought that had no proper form or meaning, but that seemed compounded of fear and violence. And all the time a voice seemed to whisper wordlessly in her ears, a voice that was menacing, a voice that urged. Actually, had she known it, she was on the verge of an attack of hysteria.

The Sunday papers announced the return of Antonius from Berlin. All that evening she sat alone, watching the little ormolu clock in the corner that ticked away the minutes that should have held her interview with Antonius. She had paid no attention to his first ultimatum; now she waited for his second and last. Twice between ten and eleven she was startled from her torpor by the sudden ringing of the telephone;

each time she waited breathlessly at the receiver till the call proved but a trifling one.

At nine next morning came Antonius's second and last ultimatum. Her heart seemed to miss a beat as she ripped open the envelope with the well-known handwriting. The note was dated Sunday at midnight, and was a brief one.

"DEAR JOANNA," it ran, "You have not answered my question, though the time has now passed. I have written a short announcement, which I propose to present to the various papers. It will interest them and their readers. Also it may interest you, so I enclose a copy. If you wish to reconsider your decision, will you phone me what time will suit you to come and see me here to-morrow? If I don't hear, I shall send off the announcement by the midnight post. Yours, H. A."

She noticed with some detached sense that the usually firm, clear handwriting was shaky and sprawling, like that of an old man. She turned to the enclosure.

The announcement, there it was! A few terse lines, utterly revealing and utterly damning in their brevity. Subconsciously she visualised them, divided and subdivided into headlines, first in the evening papers, then in the morning papers. They said everything. "He has missed his vocation as a journalist," murmured

some absurd, remote portion of her brain, " to be able to kill a woman in so few words."

She was still staring stupidly at the scraps of paper when Hodges came in, with a protesting air, to say that Mrs. Newton had called and was asking to see her.

" I told her madam was not well, but she insisted that it was urgent," she grunted disapprovingly.

" Show her up."

Jane Newton stumped into the room and stood by Joanna's bedside, looking down at her.

" You've heard that the Professor is back," she said abruptly. Joanna nodded. " You remember that time we talked in the park? You turned down then what I suggested, but now I've come to see if you've changed your mind."

" Changed my mind? About what? "

" About him. You remember that I said it must stop—all this. Even that weak, fine gentleman Lowell agrees. Well, I've thought of a plan, and it's now or never."

" Wait a minute. Is Lowell in this? " The stupid torpor of Joanna's mind vanished, as sometimes it vanished in hysteria, and in its place sprang up a sudden feverish alertness.

" He is, at last. Even he sees it now. Oh, he is not squeamish! " Jane Newton chuckled ghoulishly. For all the stolidity of her manner, there was a glint in her round blue eyes, furtively feverish, almost fierce, the look that Joanna had seen in the eyes of Lowell, and in her own eyes when she caught sight of them in

the glass. "And I shouldn't think you'd be squeamish either, from the look of you! Anyway, it's going to stop—to-night."

"But how?"

"Oh, not murder. Better than that, and to-night. We can do it without you, perhaps, but with you it's a certainty. Antonius fairly dotes on you, he does." Again Mrs. Newton's chuckle would have sent a shiver down the back of another listener. On Joanna it had no effect; she was too strung up with the semi-hysterical fever that had been consuming her for two days.

"Go on, and hurry," she said breathlessly.

"It's this. The clinic has been in the hands of workmen for repairs. By to-night they'll be finished; they got on quicker than expected. You know, the woman we had in there died, lucky devil; the man is convalescent, and away in a nursing home in the country. Only Davis and Saunders, the two attendants, sleep at the clinic, and because of the mess they come into the house for meals. But the operating-room is intact, and the room underneath, where the Professor keeps his papers and instruments and bottles of serum—in fact, the whole bag of tricks, everything that he works with. It is always kept locked by all sorts of patents, and Saunders sleeps in a little room off it. Now, if that room were burnt, and everything in it, that would be the end of everything—all the memoranda in cipher, all the drugs and implements, and everything that he has spent thirty-five years

making. In the memoranda alone there is more than any man could carry in his head, and it would take him more than a lifetime to work it all out and make everything all over again. So that'll settle him. He won't be able to do any more harm. Now do you see? "

" You are sure of all this? "

" Absolutely I've made it my business to find out."

" Go on."

" Davis and Saunders come into the house for supper at nine to-night for the last time. They stay about an hour before going back to bed. Well, in that hour I'm going to burn down the clinic. I've got everything ready—and a lot of petroleum. It'll only take a few minutes, and everything will be burnt to ashes—everything, I tell you, everything, everything! " Jane Newton's face seemed suddenly transfigured, glowed with a wild, exultant flame.

" Go on." Joanna's voice came in a gasp.

" *But*—while the men are at supper, the Professor, in case of burglary, or what not, always goes across and sits in the clinic, in the operating-room. That's where you come in. You make an excuse to go and see him to-night at nine o'clock. Keep him talking, and keep him from going across to the clinic—do anything, but keep him busy. You'll know what to do or say, I'll warrant! Nobody but you could do it so well! That will give me time. I shan't want long, I can tell you! The shutters are kept tight shut these dark nights; he won't know anything

about it till it's all over. We're two miles from the fire station, and perhaps the telephone won't work! And perhaps I'll see that the fire is a warm one, and won't be long in destroying all his pretty toys!" The light in Jane Newton's face was but half sane. "Oh, it will be a pretty sight! You and me and Lowell—his poor victims, as the clerics call us! It seems right somehow, doesn't it?"

"But——"

"Are you afraid, you poor, pretty fool? You needn't be. Perhaps you can get away before he finds out the damage, or perhaps you can pretend to know nothing at all about it. Perhaps you can dry his tears! He'll take anything from you. We don't mind."

"We? You include Lowell."

"Yes, Lowell. He doesn't say so, but I know the only thing he thinks of is you—fools that men are, with one idea. Oh, I can tell you, we haven't had too nice a time since the Professor returned—on your account too, damn you! What about it?"

Her last sentence shot out like a blow. The wild glow had died from her eyes, and was replaced by a searching glance of peasant shrewdness, but the light was reflected in the eyes of Joanna, who pressed her hands to her head, as if to still its throbbing.

"Are you afraid?"

Joanna silenced her with a gesture, and leant to pick up the telephone that stood by the bedside.

"Regent double O double O. . . . That Professor

Antonius's house? . . . He's out? Will you please give him a message when he comes in. Mrs. Joanna Fersen speaking. . . . Tell him I have received his note, and will come round this evening a little before nine to answer it myself. Got it? Repeat it, please. . . . Right. Thank you."

She hung up the receiver.

"Good," said Mrs. Newton; and, without further comment, stumped out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII

JOANNA lived through the rest of the day in a state of suppressed anticipation and impatience. It seemed to her as if the hours and minutes would never crawl away, those intervening hours and minutes till nine o'clock. Her whole being waited breathlessly for that hour of nine o'clock. With the knowledge that there was something for her to do, all her fear and dread had gone, all her torment of uncertainty. Her nerves felt calm and steady, and in her eyes was a rapt glow of exaltation. She was wrought up to the hypnotic state of the martyr of old who died for his faith, who, though he may have known fleshly qualms and shrinking, at the end listens to the fiery crackling of his stake unmoved and uplifted.

Joanna had made no plans, had assigned herself no prearranged rôle. All she knew was that she would see Antonius at nine o'clock, would keep his attention fixed for half an hour. What might happen after she did not know or care. Things would not end there, of course. The exposure and the humiliation of the morrow would be forthcoming just the same, with the added infamy of her deed thrown in. She did not care. She was wrapt in a frenzy of exaltation

and self-immolation, to which so many weeks of strain and misery and dread had led her.

It was five minutes to nine by her wrist-watch when she alighted from her car before the Regent's Park house. By the light of a street lamp a casual passer-by turned to stare at her with admiring curiosity. She wondered a little subconsciously at the familiar aspect of the house, as if it should have altered its appearance and been set for drama. She sniffed as if for the first time at the familiar aromatic scent that drifted down the long corridor from the big room at the end. She felt glad and strong and confident, and her voice was vivid and rich with life as she greeted Antonius.

He looked at her with a faint surprise, as if he had not expected her to come in gladness, and the look of surprise changed and deepened to a gloating admiration.

"How wonderful you look," he said, and she was too lost in her own rapt mood to notice his lingering, possessive tone. She adapted herself rapidly and without conscious effort to the rôle she had to play.

"Do I?" she said. "How nice of you to tell me so." In the heady, seductive warmth of her smile he forgot his lingering surprise. He forgot, too, the wracking headache, and the sickness of the nerves, that before her coming had tortured him, making his hands burn and twitch till he steadied them by a long drink of doctored brandy. His breath came a little quicker as his fingers lingered on the warm flesh of her back while he removed her fur coat. He looked

down at her with greedy eyes as he helped her to coffee, and she smiled at him. He gave a faint exclamation of recollection.

"Before we start talking," he said, "will you excuse me while I go over to the clinic for a minute? Generally I sit there at this hour while the men are away. For once it won't matter, but I'll just go the rounds, and see if everything is locked up all right."

"Oh, must you? I've got so much to say, and I'm in such a hurry to begin." She stood close to him, and he moved restlessly.

"I shouldn't be more than a couple of minutes."

She appeared to hesitate while he pulled back the long curtains that screened the garden door, and gave a little nervous laugh.

"If you leave me, I don't believe I shall have the courage to wait," she murmured. He hesitated, his hand on the door. She laid her hand, half timidly, half caressingly, on his sleeve, and the scent of her hair rose to his nostrils. His eyes darkened.

"Perhaps it won't matter for once. One gets over-fussy, you know." He took her arm and led her back to the sofa before the fire, and poured out some brandy. She shivered, and drew her lace scarf round her shoulders.

"Ouf, what a draught!" she complained. "Is the window open?" He went back to the door.

"No, all shut." He pulled the heavy curtains far across, so that they overlapped. "That better? It's not usually you who complain of the cold."

He stood looking down at her as she crouched on the hearthrug. Her face was turned up to him with a smile, but it was a mechanical smile, for her every faculty was keyed up to listen. It seemed to her that to-night her hearing was preternaturally acute. She wondered if it was really so, or merely her imagination, that she heard a faint rustling sound in the garden outside, and the distant stealthy creaking of a softly opened door.

Antonius looked down at her intently.

"You shivered. What's the matter? Still cold?" She shook her head. "Nervous?" She looked down, and his heart beat heavily.

"You needn't be. Poor little girl!" Tentatively he laid his hand on her bare shoulder, and she did not move, though her flesh shrank a little. "Did I seem brutal to you? I had to be; there was no other way. You made it so hard for me." His sensitive, fleshy fingers slid slowly down her back, caressing the warm skin. "Oh, you beautiful thing!"

Under cover of her eyelashes Joanna glanced swiftly at the clock in the corner. Only eight minutes past nine; another twenty-two minutes at the least! She was sure now that she had heard sounds of feet crossing the garden, coming back. Another twenty-two minutes! She drew back, as if shyly, from Antonius's bold hand. He leant back a little, taking both her hands in his.

"And what about the things you had to say to me, that you were in such a hurry to begin?" He

was laying an effort on himself not to rush her, or frighten her, and forced his voice to sound kindly and affectionate. "Aren't you going to tell me?"

"They—they weren't so important."

"But I want to hear them; they're important to me!" She wished he would cease talking, so that she could catch a very faint sound that she was almost certain she could hear some way off at the bottom of the garden—a faint rustling sound, that deepened to a crackle. But the heavy voice went on:

"Was it my answer that you were going to give me, that I've waited so long for? Was it?"

"Perhaps." Her voice was almost a whisper.

"And what is it?" His voice sounded confident, faintly triumphant. "What is it?"

"Supposing I don't tell you?" Joanna wondered in a detached way why the man did not see through her weak, improbable coquetry.

"Supposing I know, and want to hear all the same?"

She was certain now of the crackling sound, the sound of flames licking up dry bricks and mortar. It was so perceptible that she feared he would hear it also, and see, too, a pale glimmer of red light that peered through the chink in the ill-fitting curtains. He must not hear; he must not see—yet. She looked up, and smiled languorously at him, a smile that was nearly an invitation.

"I'm not going to tell you yet—not till just before I leave this house. You've been so harsh and so unkind to me; it's my revenge."

He laughed triumphantly.

"You little devil! You wonderful little devil! But you're going to be a little kind to me, aren't you?"

As he put greedy arms round her she swept a feverish look at the clock. Twenty minutes past nine. Another ten minutes—another ten minutes! The crackling sound was growing louder now, punctuated by an occasional soft thud, as if something had fallen, and the streak of light that spasmodically peered through the chink in the curtain was a dull scarlet. The window was sideways to them; she must not let him turn his face that way.

She made a faint show of resistance, leaning a little farther back, till, following her, his face was back to the window.

"Oh, you wonderful, wonderful thing, you perfect woman, my woman! Kiss me, kiss me! God, how I have waited, how I have fought for you!" The heavy voice was hoarse with passion, and the dark face so close to hers was terrible in its eagerness. She was no longer conscious of repulsion or fear, only of the fact that she was coining time in the drama of minutes in which she played her part, and that the clock pointed almost to half-past nine.

"Wonderful, beautiful! Mine! You and I—oh, God, you and I together! The world is ours, and you are mine. . . ." She was not conscious of the words that rolled over her, or of the fierce and crushing arms that strained and bruised her. The red glow through

the window seemed to drown the lamplight and the firelight. The clock in the corner began to strike the half-hour.

"Mine!" The dark, congested face was almost touching hers. There was no more strength in her arms to hold him from her. Fierce lips found hers, and pressed till the pain was intolerable. At last he raised his head.

"You've given me my answer!" he cried. Again his lips sought hers. . . .

From outside there was a shattering, crashing sound, as if some gigantic thing had fallen.

"*What's that?*" Antonius had leapt to the window and thrown back the curtains. "God!"

Through the windows and doors streamed in a fierce tide of crimson light that hurt the eyes, and a gust of burning air scorched their faces. The garden was illumined with light as by a midday sun, and they could see, at the bottom, the partial ruins of the clinic, that, smouldering for half an hour, had fallen in that sudden crash. They could see, too, the figures of horror-stricken men who rushed towards it from the house.

"God!"

Antonius had leapt to the telephone, fiercely jerking it. There was no answer. Brushing Joanna aside, he rushed through the door and down the garden, and she could hear his voice shouting to the men. But with the crashing of the clinic the fire had flickered out, having eaten everything and finding no further

sustenance on which to feed. Only a dense volume of smoke belched to the sky. In the very far distance could be heard the clanging bell of a fire engine summoned from the nearest alarm. Joanna's knees trembled under her. All her exaltation had left her, all her hypnotic calm, now that her part was played, and she was conscious only of feeling deathly tired.

Slowly, very slowly, Antonius stumbled back across the garden, and she noticed that his movements were like those of a very old man. In a vague way she felt sorry for him; he was stricken almost unto death. Inside the room, he stopped uncertainly in front of her.

"Too late!" he said in a dead voice. "It's all gone—everything, everything, everything!" He gestured vacantly, blindly, with his hands.

She wanted to answer something, anything, but the words would not come. It was as if she had suddenly been stricken with paralysis. His heavy eyes wandered to her face and rested there, losing their deadness, as if he were slowly regaining the power of thought.

"There were petrol tins," he said slowly. "Petrol tins. It was done on purpose. It was a plot."

His chin was sunk on his breast. Suddenly it seemed as if thought had come to him, for he raised his head and faced her accusingly.

"It was you! You did it!" His voice rang shrill and loud as a pistol-shot.

She did not answer.

She was conscious of no wish to save herself.

"You did it! You were in it!" The face of

Antonius was murderous, and he raised his arm as if to strike her a blow.

"You were in it! Answer me!" His voice tired her.

"Yes, I was in it," she answered quietly.

"Why?"

"Because it was time your work was put an end to. Because people must be saved—from you." Her voice was utterly calm and unmoved, and she felt as if she was speaking in a dream.

"You—you——" Like a jungle beast he leapt at her, grasping her by the shoulders, till she wondered dully if her bones would crack. "Then this—this evening was part of it?"

"Yes."

"Allah!"

For a moment he fell back, with bent head, as if shattered. They stood so for fully a minute, like two figures carved in stone. When he looked up, there was a new light in his eyes—the red light of murder, she knew. He made a quick movement to his hip pocket. For a moment the physical humanity in her quailed in a wild panic to escape. Then, as a drowning man is said in a flash to see his past, she saw her past, her present, and her future. Her sudden momentary panic ceased before it had begun, and she stood motionless.

Deliberately, without haste or hesitation, Antonius drew out his revolver, aiming at her, and fired. She fell, a little soft, crumpled heap, at his feet, and died as a candle is blown out.

He stared blindly at the little soft, scented heap, and at the stream of crimson blood that trickled from it across the carpet. For a moment his face was contracted in an anguish beyond words, then he turned the revolver to his own heart and fired again, and fell.

THE END